Choices of Men and Gods
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/11266389.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con
Category:	M/M, Multi
Fandom:	Pirates of the Caribbean (Movies)
Relationship:	Jack Sparrow/Hector Barbossa, Hector Barbossa/Jack Sparrow, Blackbeard/Jack Sparrow, Edward Teach/Captain Teague, Barbossa/Theodore Groves/Jack Sparrow
Character:	Jack Sparrow, Hector Barbossa, Joshamee Gibbs, Theodore Groves, Blackbeard | Edward Teach (Pirates of the Caribbean), Angelica Malon, Philip Swift, Syrena (Pirates of the Caribbean)
Additional Tags:	AU, Polyamory, Sparbossa fluff with no regrets, Coercion, Age Difference, Angst, Romance, Slowburn Relationship, Established Relationship, Obession, True Love, Youth Restoration, Blackbeard/Jack non-con, Edward Teach has serious issues, Angelica has a weird daddy kink apparently, don't blame me blame the movie
Stats:	Published: 2017-06-21 Chapters: 11/11 Words: 95524

Choices of Men and Gods

by Siriusfanatic

Summary

Jack Sparrow and Hector Barbossa find themselves unexpectedly reunited in London, where Sparrow learns of the quest to find the legendary Fountain of Youth has begun spread to the monarchs England and Spain, and finds himself again a wanted man not just by the British, but by the feared pirate Blackbeard and a ghost from his past, seeking revenge.

**this story follows the plot of OST but with many additions that follow the story line I already worked with in my AWE series. Jack and Hector are in an established if be it on-again-off-again relationship.

Notes

I wrote this back in 2011, but demand has been so high for my POTC stuff lately that I decided to post it on this site as well, as I hope to do some new work for the fandom as well. The Sparbossa fluff is a mainstay and plentiful, but be warned that other relationships are present and this story features a polyamory relationship.

Chapter 1

“All part of the plan?”

Jack almost didn’t hear Gibbs for the ringing in his head at being struck bluntly at the back of the head with a barrel rifle. He blinked up at the stunned old man and his muttonchops and managed to wheeze out; “No.” Before falling into the arms of the waiting royal guard and being promptly dragged off.

Retaining most of his awareness, Jack was almost glad to be off his feet as he dragged in from the damp and dank London streets into the lavish halls of St. James’s Palace. He knew not why he was being taken here, rather than hoisted back into the jail cart along with Gibbs and toted back to jail to await trial and hanging, but he wasn’t about to complain. Again, he was almost glad of the reprieve of will. He’d been scratching a living out of ports for months, bartering, trading and of course lying and cheating his away across the British Isles, all in search of his stolen ship The Black Pearl, her captain, and more recently Joshamee Gibbs, whom he had discovered had come under dire circumstances.

Jack had become a bit thin, ragged; his hair having grown at least several more inches in the last nine months so that it had reached his mid back, and becoming starkly sun bleached in some places, after he’d spent almost three weeks lying stranded on a beach after a hurricane. He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised that he wasn’t as instantly recognizable as he once had been. But worst of all was his starving belly.

He’d been four days without food and not but watered down rum to sustain him. Perhaps it was said slight state of starving delirium that caused him to concoct the plan to impersonate the Judge presiding over Gibb’s trial. He’d had to do some...questionable things...to obtain the needed affects for that plan. It had been worth, briefly.

He found himself seated abruptly upon a gold gilded chair and shackled to it. It was out of instinct, but Sparrow immediately began rattling the chains, tugging at them viciously and testing their strength. He earned another blunt blow to the head for his trouble and was left alone in the middle of what he realized was the grand dining hall of King George.

Jack’s eyes shifted around the room, drinking in the detail and expensive display of avarice before him. He could live comfortably for three months just by selling one of the gold serving trays on the table, for another year if he pawned one of the tapestries hanging from the walls. Yes, the royals knew how to spend their money, since they certainly weren’t bothering to use it on the common good. But gold and jewels aside, Jack was lusting after another kind of decadence. The long table in front of him was covered in an assortment of delicious looking edibles; cakes and tarts, loaves of freshly baked bread, roast goose and pig, fresh fruit and wine...

His stomach made a loud mournful roar and clenched upon itself as he salivated. He was still several feet from the feast however, and could not reach so much as a crumb. The pirate gave a jolt of his chair, finding that he could move it with little exertion. And so he did. Bouncing along the marbled floor, he managed to drag himself close enough to reach for a cream puff pastry...then he heard the creak of the doors opening.

He sat back stiffly, his foot kicking the tray and causing the coveted pastry to go sailing up into the air, where it then impaled itself upon the glittering chandelier that hung over the table. Jack whimpered piteously, his stomach twisting.

“Are you Jack Sparrow?” a tight, stuffy voice inquired briskly of him as Jack looked up to find himself audience to a host to several powdered and lace-clad fops, who were all leering at him like some mangy dog. The largest and certainly most pompous of who seated himself neatly upon the throne at the center of the table, squinting at Sparrow. “Can’t he speak?” he muttered, looking to the leaner men next to him.

Jack was afraid to, because a great many clever and insulting observations had entered his mind so quickly he knew that there was almost no way of containing them, and his situation was already precarious. “There should be a ‘captain’ in there somewhere.” he grinned finally.

“Are you the same Sparrow who is charting an expedition to the Fountain of Youth?”

Jack bristled a little, for he had grown very tired of this game of mistaken or perhaps stolen identity. “No.”

King George, his curly wig swaying across his gold colored vest and jacket, of whose buttons all seemed about to burst, turned sourly towards his advisors. “You’ve brought me the wrong pirate. Bring me Jack Sparrow and dispose of this imposter!”

Jack sat up quickly. “I am Jack Sparrow! The one and only.” he corrected quickly, jerking once again upon his chains. “As to the rest I cannot say.”

The men before him looked very confused, not to mention annoyed as Jack continued to rattle his shackles. “Will someone please remove those infernal chains?!” King George bellowed finally, and Jack grinned for this was what he had wanted all along. The restraints had no sooner been lifted when a voice called out against it.

Jack's heart leapt, but he was confused. The voice he knew, but he couldn't make sense of its place here in these halls. There was a strange sound then from the doorway. A heavy foot fall accompanied by a bone-chilling scrape. Sparrow watched as a figure appeared in the shadowed entrance, supported by a crutch and clothed in a lavish naval garb and powdered wig beneath a garish admiral's hat. Jack almost didn't recognize the familiar face beneath all the strange accouterments.

"Hector?"

Barbossa smiled back at him with painted lips as he limped forward heavily, revealing that the scraping sound came not only from a crutch, but from a heavy wooden peg that now stood in place of a right leg. "Why is that man not shackled? Bind him at once before he escapes!"

He paused and bowed deeply before the king, and Jack found himself agape with shock. This puff-wigged buffoon in gold and lace could not be his stalwart Hector, whom he had last seen sleeping soundly in his cabin.

"Admiral Barbossa," the Prime Minister announced stiffly, startling Jack even further at the title. Hector removed his hat and nodded to him before looking at Jack again. It had been too long since he'd last laid eyes upon his friend, sometimes enemy and lover, and to see the way he looked at him now only made Hector more conscious of the time that had passed between them in absence. "Jack Sparrow be easy enough to catch," he smirked, "it's holding him that be the problem."

The tan skinned scruffy pirate was moving steadily around the table, his eyes fixed on Barbossa, almost in a trance like state. But as he moved to approach the man a young officer stepped forward suddenly, nudging the barrel of his pistol into Jack's side in warning. Sparrow turned to look him in the face and flashed him a smile full of gold teeth; "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

The officer; one Lieutenant Theodore Groves, had indeed seen Jack Sparrow on more than one occasion, from the shoulders of both the late Commodore Norrington and Lord Culter Beckett. The last time he had laid eyes upon the wily pirate, it had been as a soaked and shivering survivor of the destroyed Endeavor after the brutal Battle between the pirates and The East India Trading Company.

"Stand down, Lieutenant," Barbossa said, his voice soft and drawling in an unnatural way, "He'll not harm me."

Groves shot an uncertain look back at the older man, and reluctantly stepped aside. Now the two old sea dogs stood face to face. “Hector,” Jack began again, smiling best he could. He took a lock of Barbossa’s curled tresses between his fingers and felt the stiff texture of it; “Nice to see a pirate make something of himself.”

“Privateer,” Barbossa corrected, ignoring the mockery in Sparrow’s tone. “Servant to the King and under the protection of the crown.”

Jack cringed at the statement. Clearly this was not the Barbossa he knew; who let no man nor monarch rule him. It was disheartening, even disgusting. But there was a bigger question upon his mind at that moment; “And what’s become of my beloved Pearl?”

Hector’s eyes changed. Jack saw them cloud and sadden, like a storm cloud passing over blue waters and turning them grey. “Lost.” he answered hoarsely.

“Lost?” Sparrow repeated, feeling his chest clench.

“Aye. I defended her mightily, but she sunk none the less.” he answered darkly. He leaned heavily upon his crutch then, tapping the side of the wooden peg that now replaced his missing appendage. “And received this for my trouble.” He watched Sparrow’s face, searching his eyes in an attempt to see which emotion would overwhelm him first; pity or fury. It was the latter.

Jack made to lung at him, but Groves grabbed him roughly and pulled him back. “If that ship be sunk proper, then you should be sunk with it!”

Barbossa nodded sadly. “Aye. In a kinder world.”

King George interrupted them then; “Admiral Barbossa, has it not been made clear? Every moment we tarry the Spanish outdistance us! I will not have some melancholy Spanish monarch achieve immortality! Can this miscreant acquaintance of yours provide us with a course to the Fountain or not!?”

Before Jack could reply, Hector reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling him closer and giving him a severe look; “Aye, your Majesty! He can and he will.”

“You sir, have stooped.” Jack muttered darkly, his face full of disappointment and disdain.

Hector smiled all the same, “Jack, our sands be all but run. What’s the harm in joining with the winning side?” Hearing these words come from Hector’s own lips sent Jack’s head reeling; for certainly he’d heard the same statement touted before by the likes of Sao Feng and Cutler Beckett, but never his Hector. Barbossa’s pale eyes shifted from Jack’s abashed features to the man who still held him at gun point, “And ye meet a nicer class of person.”

The young officer looked a bit flustered then, staring back at the pirate turned admiral. It was just enough distraction for Jack to take advantage of; “I understand everything. Except that wig.”

He elbowed Groves viciously in the gut, causing him to gasp as the wind was knocked from him and fall backwards as Jack sprang upon the table, sprinting across it as it’s coverings were flung across the floor; destroying the King’s feast. He shrieked in response to having a pirate running loose in his palace, as the guards rushed to contain him. But Barbossa stood calmly aside, watching as Jack did just as he expected. “I told ye to chain him!” He sighed, turning and limping back the way he came, motioning for the winded Groves to follow him.

“Sir?” the other man coughed, still rubbing his ribs.

Barbossa nodded above them to the balcony. “Where does that lead?”

“The seventh floor study, sir.”

“Assist me there, my good man.”

Groves looked confused; “But sir–!”

“That be an order, Lieutenant.” he answered sharply, eyes flashing. Groves stiffened, still unaccustomed to taking orders from a common pirate parading as a man of class and high station, but remained a slave to his own propriety.

Sure enough, they had no sooner reached the landing leading into the little library over looking the street below then Jack came sprinting through the second set of doors, set on climbing out the window and climbing onto the ledge beyond. Barbossa made a brutal move however, swinging his crutch in high fast arch and striking Jack across the head with it. The tan pirate went down with a yelp and laid there in a heap.

“Excellent move, Admiral!” Groves grinned, moving to chain the unconscious man. “There be no need for that,” Barbossa waved him off, standing over Jack’s body and turning him over with the foot of his crutch. “Get him up and take him to my quarters.”

Groves seemed taken aback. “Surely not, Admiral! He’ll try to escape again!”

Barbossa gave the younger man a hard, knowing look. “Try perhaps, but succeed, no. I know how to handle this one.” He frowned, turning on heel. “Now do as you’re told.” He thought he heard Groves grumble something at him under his breath, and he chuckled a little and let him have his indignity. He would be dealt with later.

Jack came to again shortly as he was slung across the large feather bed in the middle of the room. How he had gotten from one point to the next the was not sure, but it hardly seemed to matter just then. His head was ringing, and for the moment escape was beyond his reach.

He heard the latch of the door and looked up to see Barbossa turning over the key in the lock and tucking it away inside his jacket before turning to face his guest. “Thought you were being clever, did ye?” he chuckled ruefully. The pirate on the bed rubbed the growing goose egg on his forehead, eyeing the other man as he hobbled towards him; “It would have worked.”

“I’ve no doubt.”

“You can’t keep me here.”

Barbossa gestured grandly towards the floor length windows of his room. “There be the door. Fly, if you think you can.” He made his way to a table near the fireplace and started to pour them both a glass of wine as a servant entered from a side door, carrying a heavy tray laden with the same delicacies that King George had been feasting upon before Jack had trampled it. Sparrow stared at it with hungry, ravenous eyes, mouth watering, but held himself back from leaping off the bed and devouring whatever he could reach, focusing upon Barbossa.

“What’s become of you, Hector?”

The old captain snorted, not looking back at him, taking a deep drink from his glass. “As if ye care.”

He felt Jack’s hand at his sleeve and the younger man whirled him around, causing him to momentarily loose balance, falling against the other pirate, who had no trouble supporting him as he held his pistol beneath his chin. “Oh I care a great deal, old friend.” He knocked the hat from Barbossa’s head with contempt, followed by the wig, “Especially when I come to learn that you’ve turned into a curtsying lap dog for that fat pompous pig of a monarch. Of all the indignities a proper pirate, not to mention a Pirate Lord, could bring upon himself! What’s become of the Hector I knew? You were a force to be reckoned with! So virile, and fierce...and...and...!” Jack grabbed him by the back of head and pulled him into a fiery kiss that made Barbossa clutch him tightly, consumed by it. It had been too long since their last meeting; when years of jealousies and resentments had finally been cast aside in the face of almost certain demise.

True, they had parted ways again on less than amicable means, but just then it seemed to matter little. They had this moment, and their lives had become so uncertain that it could not be determined if they would have another.

They fumbled for the bed, falling upon it in a heap, trying to undo the other. Barbossa managed to wrestle Jack out of his dirty jacket; his hat falling to the floor next to his wig as the swarthy pirate pulled him out of his own coat and began to fumble with the buttons on his ivory waist coat. “Jack,” he said softly, touching the man’s face and admiring the odd “x” shaped scar upon his cheek bone there, “Jack, slow down...”

Sparrow stopped in his endeavors long enough to catch Hector’s eyes and he momentarily forgot his carnal greed. He laid himself alongside the older pirate, who looked more himself now and did his best not to stare at the obvious. “I suppose apologies are in order.”

Hector scratched at his sweaty, fading red hair and chuckled. “Well, I be listening.”

“I meant from you.” Sparrow answered; “There’s the not so minor matter of the Pearl.”

In turn Barbossa bristled, narrowing his eyes at the other man. “And ye think ye be owing me no apology for flittin’ off in the middle of the night without so much as a goodbye to whore yourself out to the besotted dregs of Tortuga?”

“I wasn’t!”

“Come off it, Sparrow! You saw yourself in a cage and you fled, just like you always have.” The former pirate muttered, looking away. Jack took his hand and he felt the familiar shape of the jade dragon ring upon his thumb. “You weren’t the cage, Hector. And I...might have made a mistake, going off the way I did.” Sparrow confessed, though he wouldn’t look at him as he spoke. Barbossa softened and nuzzled his neck with his lips and nose, pushing aside Jack’s lengthy dreads and hearing the other man sigh in response. “I hope I didn’t hit ye too hard with me crutch.” he mumbled against his skin.

“Hard enough,” Jack pouted, leaning further into the other man, hungry for warmth and his familiar touch. His allowed his hand to wander across Barbossa’s thigh, moving unconsciously downward towards his knee until it met with the unfamiliar cold smoothness of wood. Jack jumped back reflexively, and he thought he saw Barbossa’s face turn slightly pink with embarrassment. “Oh Hector,” he cooed sympathetically, but he shushed him. “We’ll have time for that awkward conversation later, m’love. But for the moment, I think more pressing matters be hand.”

He moved to push the other man down into the mattress and reach for his belts when Jack’s stomach gave a very audible rumble. Both men froze for a moment before Barbossa burst into loud peels of laughter, holding his sides as he fell off to the right. Jack seethed quietly. “Laugh while ye can, ye twisted blighter,” he muttered.

Hector sat up eventually wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. “Hungry, are ye?”

“You could say I’m a bit peckish.” the starving man replied.

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They fell into a comfortable silence after the meal, and by then the light outside had faded from cold grey to black. Jack stood at the window, looking down at the city below and it’s glittering lights from windows and street torches that illuminated the darkness. He could see that the grounds below were still heavily guarded, and the harbor was too far off for his liking.

He was fresh from a bath, his first in almost two weeks, and Barbossa had sent his clothes to be cleaned as well, so he stood in a borrowed pair of breeches and tunic. Hector was sitting leisurely by the fire, thumbing through some thick dusty volume of science. “And I have your word that Gibbs is unharmed?”

“Aye, my solemn vow,” Hector replied boredly, turning the page leisurely. Jack glanced back at the tome he was leafing through, squinting at the title. “Frogs?”

“Fascinating creatures,” the older man replied with a strange light in his eyes. Sparrow scoffed, rolling his eyes, “I suppose you’ve loads of time for that sort of thing now, when you’re not having high tea with his royal hiney.”

Hector snapped the book shut and set it aside. “ Mock me all ye like, but ye’ll be showin’ proper respect for authority while ye be a guest here, Sparrow, make no mistake about that.” Jack smirked at the challenge. “Who’s authority? Yours?” He poked the man in the chest as he stood, settling his crutch beneath his arm again. “There’s no one here to impress, darlin’. I know what you are, always have been, always will be. Pirate is in your blood, mate.” He looked Barbossa over, for he had to admit that while the sight was strange, now that he was in less formal naval attire, he did look quite dashing. It reminded him a little of Norrington and that very brief and fleeting affair. Poor old James would probably be spinning in his watery grave if he could see the likes of Barbossa in such attire.

“The Navy’s given me a second chance, Jack, where I might not have had any. They took care of me, gave me this fine leg and comfortable rooms, plenty of pay for me trouble. And if all it costs me is a bit of ring kissing here and there, I can be livin’ with that.” Hector reasoned. He ran his hand along Sparrow’s cheek before reaching back into his hair, toying with it’s new adornments and drawing Jack in closer. “And if affords me certain privileges...such as keepin’ you close, where as you might be spending the night in a cell like Mr. Gibbs.”

“Much appreciated,” Jack purred, feeling himself drawn in by the other man and struggling to focus on the questions buzzing around his head rather than the growing desire in his body. “But how do you know these people truly trust you?”

Hector smirked and moved away then, limping off towards the double doors of his room. “It be more a matter of politics, Jack. These are strange times we live in, and the crown would much rather pardon the misdeeds of one of it’s own when it’s fighting a battle with Spain.” He gave the door a vicious pounding with his fist and heard someone on the other side yelp and scramble away. “Isn’t that right?!” he bellowed, knowing he’d been spied upon. “They must be desperate.” Jack nodded, stealing an apple slice from Barbossa’s plate and popping it into his mouth. “The Fountain of Youth could provide quite lucrative for the Empire,” Hector nodded. “Which is why they need you so badly. Or rather, what you stole from me.”

He reached into Jack’s discarded jacket that hung over the back of a chaise, but found it empty. “Where is it?”

“The Moa Kun Map?” Jack piqued, “I’ve no idea.” But as a matter of fact he did know. Gibbs had lifted it from him at some point between the time they were escaping the court house and being apprehended here. That little slight still stung at the pirate, for Gibbs had always been a man he could trust, even in the worst of times. A twinge of anger passed over Barbossa’s lined features. “Ye lost it?” he snarled.

Jack shrugged. “Not lost per-say. More like...misplaced.”

Barbossa groaned. “Idiot. I hope ye had the presence of mind to at least study the thing. If ye can’t guide an expedition, then your usefulness is gone, and not even I can protect ye.” But Jack didn’t look troubled. “Maybe I have, and maybe I haven’t.” he winked.

“Sparrow,”

Jack shushed him, twisting a nimble finger through the rust colored curls of his beard. “Hector, do you remember that summer’s evening we spent in Shipwreck Cove? You know, the night of the festival?”

Barbossa seemed momentarily thrown by the change in topic but smiled as his memory of the evening in question returned. His ran his hand over Jack’s right forearm, along the fading blue tattoo, “When ye got this?”

“Yes. Do you remember when we snuck off to watch the fireworks on the bay...?” His voice had become low and sultry, and Hector realized he was being pulled back towards the bed. Jack leaned in to kiss him deeply, and Barbossa moaned, tasting the stolen apple on his lips and tongue, as the younger man pulled him onto the bed, arching up into him. The sun tanned pirate could feel that the other man wanted this just as much as he did, but there was a nervousness in him, perhaps even a reluctance. Jack knew what it stemmed from. “And don’t go thinking that I’m going to be going easy on you, just because of that,” he smiled, popping open the buttons on Barbossa’s vest and sending them flying in all directions so that he could feel bare skin.

He leaned up and nipped hungrily at the man’s neck and earned another moan from his old ship mate. Distracted by the love bite, Jack reached down to feel his lover’s altered limb, showing he wasn’t repulsed or frightened by it. Hector’s fingers fumbled with his for a moment and the peg itself was removed, leaving only a bound stump behind. Feeling nothing below Hector’s knee made Jack feel a sudden welling of remorse and sorrow, but for his lover’s sake he would not show it. Instead he pulled Hector into another hungry kiss and tried to flip him onto his back so that he could do the brunt of the work.

“Oh no, ye don’t!” Hector hissed, pushing Jack onto his side instead as he rolled behind him and began to undo the buttons of his breeches while biting into his shoulder. “I don’t want yer pity, just yer body!” Jack repressed a yell of lust and grinned instead, rubbing himself against the other man suggestively and nibbling his cheek and jaw. Hector soon had them both sufficiently undressed, with Jack pressed hard against him as he ground into him, just short of giving the man what he really wanted.

“Hector,” Jack rasped, trying to keep the other man as close to him as possible, enjoying the teasing but wanting much more. “Say it again.”

Hector shuddered, pulling Jack’s leg a little higher of his own thigh and pushed himself roughly forward, earning a shout from the other man that he was certain must have echoed off the high walls and ceilings. He was left a bit breathless himself, for Sparrow felt tighter than he imagined, and the trembling in the other man suggested that it had been awhile since he’d had this kind of attention from another. Hector felt a wave of affection for the other man, holding him hard against him and laying his head along side Sparrow’s as he rocked up into him. “I love you.”

Though they struggled to keep their intimacies discrete, both soon became overwhelmed by the moment, groaning and calling out as nerves jumped in delight and skin seemed to melt and catch fire in the heat of it all. Jack couldn’t recall being so swept up in love making before, at least not in recent years. He’d had plenty of flings, and men and women whom he had shared brief moments of lust with. But it was all shallow, carnal release. Nothing like this.

“Jack,” the privateer groaned against his shoulder, “I’m not going to last...!”

“It’s alright,” Sparrow panted, kissing him as he moved Barbossa’s hand back between his legs, eager to be finished. Hector’s other hand dug into the smooth flesh of Jack’s thigh as he thrust upward hard and fast, bellowing as he finally reached climax, calling out the other man’s name. He felt Jack release over his hand a moment later, and then it was done and they both laid there exhausted on the sweat soiled sheets. Sparrow waited until Hector had softened a little before pulling away, groaning and falling upon his stomach, face in the feathered mattress.

Barbossa pulled the bed curtains shut on his side before stretching himself across Sparrow’s naked back, kissing his shivering skin. “If I didn’t know any better, Jack,” he mumbled, “I’d almost swear that you had been saving yourself for me.”

“You do like to flatter yourself, don’t you?” Jack chuckled, twisting his fingers with the other man’s. Barbossa rested his head across his shoulders, feeling exhaustion take him. “Will ye be here when I wake up, or should I say goodbye now?”

But Jack was already asleep and didn’t answer.

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Chapter 2

Jack woke to warm sunlight and the best night's sleep he'd had in ages. Hector was still right where he had fallen, and he could feel the other man's warm breath across his back. The moment would have been perfectly content, if only they were once again upon the Pearl. He could almost not bring himself to believe that his ship was truly gone, although there was every evidence to the contrary. Yet Jack had an inkling, somewhere in the pit of his soul that she was still afloat somewhere. He supposed that in binding himself to that ship the way he had, promising his very soul for it, that he could not help but leave an imprint upon it, and it upon him, so that he always had a sense of where she might be at any time. Only now that feeling was clouded and vague.

He started to drift back to sleep, not wanting to disturb his lover, when he felt a prickling upon his lower thigh, moving up to the naked skin of his backside. Like needles prodding at skin. Jack turned his head towards the source and found that they had been joined in bed by a rather sinister looking feline; a Siamese cat to be precise. The creature was long and lean with mean green eyes and claws that could tear a common mouse to slivers in an instant. And it was currently trying to bed itself down upon Jack's posterior.

"Shoo!" he hissed at it, bearing his teeth. "Get away from there, you mangey host for violin strings!" The cat hissed at him, and the noise caused Barbossa to lift his head, hair falling in a tangle over his face. He spotted the cat clawing at Jack and grabbed it by the scruff of the neck, giving it a light toss to the floor. "Off with ye, ye devil! Bad Sao..."

"Sao?"

Jack sat up, rubbing his rear gingerly at he stared between Hector and the cat. "Did you just call that bloody thing, 'Sao'?"

Hector chuckled, smoothing out the curls of his beard. "Aye. He was a gift from the King. What I'd want with a damnable animal like that, I wouldn't know. But it took a liking to me, even though it has nothing but disdain for everything else that moves in this place. So I took to calling it Sao." The feline curled elegantly upon Barbossa's reading chair, watching the two men with hooded eyes.

Jack hissed at it again and looked away, "I'll never understand royalty. Or cats. Or you."

Barbossa kissed him warmly. "Oh, I think you understand me pretty well." He nuzzled the other man, feeling sentimental and affectionate; "I must admit, I'm a bit surprised to find ye still here. Thought you would have been long gone by now."

"And I would have been. But, I must admit...a warm, dry bed and safe pair of arms to sleep in was too good to pass up." He kissed Barbossa's lips and cheek again and grew serious. "But I can't stay, Hector."

Barbossa sighed, knowing it would come to this. He hadn't dared to hope, not even after last night's passionate reunion, that Jack would linger in his services. It might have been different if he were still a pirate. He gathered the loose ends of his rust colored hair, which was showing more

grey than ever, into a loose knot at the back of his head as he stood. “Ye say that as if ye have a choice.”

Jack scoffed at the veiled threat, looking for his clothes, which had been folded neatly on a bench near the servant’s entrance. He wondered briefly if they had been seen asleep in the same bed. Then again; what was another rumor about the illustrious and mysterious Jack Sparrow and whom he made bedfellows with?

“Let me be clear, mate,” He tugged on his breeches, boots, shirt and waistcoat as Barbossa went about the same ritual at a slightly more delayed pace. “I have only ever once considered employment with his majesty’s navy, and it earned me this,” He flashed the scarred shape a “P” upon his wrist. “I have no wish to make that mistake again.”

Barbossa scoffed, fastening his peg leg back into place; “Ye think King George wants the likes of you in his services? That be a bit arrogant, Jack, even for you. You’d be serving as my guide and nothing more.”

“And your personal consort as well.” Sparrow smirked, smoothing the edge of his mustache.

“Goes without sayin’.”

“Tempting, but no.”

Shrugging on his jacket, Hector sighed heftily. “And what of Mr. Gibbs? Did ye forget about his welfare?”

“You won’t harm a bristling grey hair on that old sod’s head.”

“What makes ye think that?”

Jack knocked him against the wall, pinning him there with his body and kissing him hard before leaning back cleverly and whispering into his ear; “Because, he has the map.”

Before Hector could react, Jack had whirled, grabbed an arm chair and had flung it through the nearest window, dashing over the balcony and scrambling onto the ledge. “GROVES!” Barbossa bellowed, and with in moments the Lieutenant had come barging through the door, holding his musket. “Sir!?”

“Out there! Catch him!”

The two made for the shattered window, peering out onto the ledge for any sign of Jack, but he seemed to have disappeared. They could hear more footsteps as other guards came to see what the trouble was. “Where is he?”

Barbossa swept his gaze across the streets. It was a four story drop to the street below, and not even Jack could survive such a fall. Then he noticed that one of the street banners was hanging oddly. He smirked. “Very clever, Jack...”

Groves caught on then too, and before Hector could stop him, he was calling for others to assist him. Three more guards raced into the room as the young Lieutenant stood back, pointing out the pirate’s position. One began hacking away at the rope that bound the banner firmly in place. Jack gave a little yelp of surprise as he lost his footing and dangled precariously over the bustling street below.

“Don’t kill him, ye fools!” Barbossa barked, jerking several of the officers away from the window. “Get down there, now!” They scrambled under the admiral’s orders, except for the Lieutenant, who seemed reluctant to leave. Hector gave him a harsh look and he too turned and headed out the door at last, leaving Barbossa to look worriedly out onto the street once more, but Jack was gone.

“Sparrow?”

Glancing to his left he saw that Jack had managed to scramble back upon the ledge and was hiding behind a stone carving of a lion. When he saw that only Hector remained upon the ledge, he peered back out. “Close one.”

“You idiot,” the Admiral admonished. “Ye’d dash yourself to bits all over the street just to spite me.” Jack leaned back over the balcony and stole one last kiss. Hector tried to hold him, but knew he couldn’t. “Where are you going, Jack?”

“To find this imposter who claims to be me, and probably steal said ship and crew they’ve collected.” the pirate answered briskly. “And you?”

“We sail for the Fountain.”

Jack nodded worriedly, for he knew the road would be treacherous, for it was a path he had decided to take himself. Hector looked at him sadly, “So this is goodbye again?”

“Goodbyes are for the ones who expect not to see again.” Jack replied firmly. He undid his compass from his belt and slid it into Hector’s hand. “And I will see you again, mate. Count on it.”

Hector beamed. “First to the finish?”

“Aye!”

Sparrow turned, grabbed the loose bit of rope still binding the street banner and used it to swing down to the street below, landing precariously atop a carriage just as the guards were descending upon the street. The pirate captain waved his hat to him, and disappeared down the road, with the guards in hot pursuit.

The Admiral smiled wistfully and turned once more to his rooms, looking at the damage that had been done in Jack’s escape, and found that he was not alone. Groves had lingered behind and now was fixing him with a suspicious, dubious look, his fingers creeping nervously along his weapon. Hector looked at him calmly; “Something that you needed, Lieutenant?”

The tan skinned youth seemed flustered, unsure what to say. “You were...consorting with that pirate, sir.” he muttered at last. “I heard you talking last night. Scheming, as it were.”

“Did ye now?”

The former pirate approached the young officer easily, the loud echo of the his cane and pegleg hitting the floor the only sound to be heard. Groves found himself staring into Barbossa’s watery blue eyes and found an intenseness there that he was unsure he’d ever seen matched, not even by the most stalwart and seasoned sailors. This was a man who had seen things; things most could never imagine, much less believe. “And I’m sure you heard other things as well.” Hector added, a smile forming at the corners of his lips. Groves blushed darkly, for he had been standing watch there in the hall all night and had heard the Admiral and the Captain in their lewd affair. The sounds of sex so close by had made him feel antsy and uncomfortable, but he could not leave his post, and was try though he might, he could not put the picture of it from his mind.

Worst of all perhaps, was knowing that it wasn't an unpleasant picture. In his many years of service to the Navy, he had encountered pirates many times, and in fleeting and exciting moments, been in the presence of Jack Sparrow himself. It was one of Theodore Grove's darkest and most well-guarded secrets, that he sometimes fantasied about the pirate when he was alone. He had envied men like James Norrington, who had gotten to know the legendary pirate personally. But he would never admit such thoughts allowed. He'd been raised a gentlemen of class and breeding, and knew very well what was expected of him.

It goaded him then to see Barbossa, a common thief, scoundrel and obvious traitor to the crown, to be given such high rank and station over even himself, all because King George needed someone of more clever wit and experience to bring him his prize.

Barbossa stepped a bit closer to him, and Theodore gave an inaudible gasp, feeling that the other man must be reading his every thought for then he spoke; "I know that you have grudgingly accepted the position of my first officer on this voyage, Lt. Groves. It must be difficult for you, serving a man whom you've been taught to hate and despise."

"Not you personally, sir. All traitors to the crown."

Hector grinned, leaning a little closer to the upstart. His face was youthful, tan and clean shaven. He's seen plenty of action in his time, though was usually from the thick of it, surviving on the outskirts of battle and always managing to stay just beyond harm's reach. He had been lucky, and perhaps he knew it. But there was a spark of something in this proper and perhaps somewhat sheltered sailor; a yearning for something more than tradition and station and the confines of proper society.

The older man pulled from inside his waist coat a leather bound bit of parchment baring the King's seal. "This pardon declares me forgiven of all perceived crimes to the crown, and it was hard earned, young man. You may look down your nose at me, and speak of class and refinement. But never forget that I am still your better and you will obey my command without protest or question. Do we have an understanding, Groves?"

"Yes, sir."

Hector tucked the letters away and put an arm around his shoulder. "That bit of business out the way," He playful leaned forward, speaking into the young man's ear, "Do you look forward to serving under me?"

His breath on the delicate shell of his ear sent a shiver down the young Lieutenant's spine and an image burst brightly across his mind's eye, of himself and the Admiral naked and fucking roughly in the dark, the way he had imagined the man doing with the pirate the night before and his face turned scarlet. Hector cackled, giving him a little shake. "Now, my good man, I require an audience with one Joshamee Gibbs. Be a good lad and escort me."

**

Jack sprinted down the rain slick alleyway, flattening himself against the wall at the opposite end of the street and waiting until the thunder of feet and hooves had passed before allowing himself a

breath. He thought himself safe, not noticing that he had been spotted by one lone gunman, who had a mind to claim the bounty on his head for himself.

Jack surely would have been shot dead then, but another pistol crack proceeded the gunman's own, and he fell dead to the street. Sparrow looked up in surprise, and saw through the clearing smoke the visage of his own aging father. "Hello, Jackie."

**

For his part, Gibbs was awaiting his own surprise meeting, though under much less pleasant circumstances. Shackled ankle and wrist, the poor old first mate found himself shuffling towards the gallows. He pleaded for the guards to listen to him, that his sentence had been commuted, and that death was off the table. But they didn't seem interested. He wondered if these men weren't the left over dregs of Beckett's cruel command, who hung all suspected of piracy indiscriminately, without cause or evidence.

He had almost reached the gibbet, when a new face greeted him; that of Hector Barbossa's. The former pirate looked a pale shadow of his former formidable self, dressed in Admiral's clothing and baring a hangman's noose over his shoulder. "Mr. Gibbs," he greeted stiffly. "How long has it been?"

"Not long enough."

The Admiral shooed away the on-looking guard, leaving only himself, Gibbs and Groves, who remained vigilant and silent next to him, but his eyes were drinking in every detail of the scene. Hector tossed the first mate the rope; "I trust you can tie a noose."

"That be a hard thing, forcing a man to twist his own hanging knot."

"You must lie in your bed the way you made it," the other man replied, enjoying watching the other pirate squirm. He had no real grudge against Gibbs, whom had never offered him personal offense. All the same, he felt coldness towards the man who had replaced his position at Sparrow's side, even if it was only in confidence and title.

"Where's Jack Sparrow?" Gibbs demanded, now fearing for his captain's safety if Barbossa now stood with the royals, who had put a high price upon Jack's head.

"Why don't you tell me?" Barbossa asked coyly. "Where was the scoundrel headed before he got tangled up trying to rescue your sorry neck?"

Gibbs didn't know if he should divulge this, but he could see no point in hiding what Barbossa must already know; "Well, you've heard the rumors. Someone impersonating Jack is collecting a ship and a crew to go after the Fountain of Youth."

This last bit came as a surprise to Barbossa and he paused thoughtfully, feeling a new twist of worry in his guts. "Aye. And if he be on said course, how then would he chart it?" Groves looked between the two aging men, intrigued by their exchange. This was as close to one of Jack Sparrow's legendary plans as he had ever been. "With the Mao Kun Map of course."

Hector chuckled deep in his throat and grabbed Gibbs roughly by his neckerchief, dragging him forward as his chains rattled. "Liar. Ye may think yerself a clever deceiver, Mr. Gibbs, but I have it

from the source. You stole that map from Jack, naught but yesterday."

Gibbs paled, licking his lips at his treachery being brought to attention. Barbossa held out his palm expectantly, "Out with it." When the man hesitated he turned him to face the gibbet again. "Unless ye'd rather share the coordinates with the crows."

Reluctantly the pirate removed the map from it's hidden place inside his vest pocket and unfurled it. Barbossa smiled, reaching for it, only to have Gibbs hurl it to the ground before turning over a glowing lantern onto it, watching as it smashed across the map and instantly consume it. "Fool!" Hector bellowed, knowing it was to late to save it. To think that the charts to all the lost wonders of the world had been swallowed up by flame in a single second, all thanks to a drunken fool like Joshamee Gibbs.

"I had just enough time to study those infernal circles. Every route, every destination! All right here," he pointed at his own thick skull. Barbossa blustered for a moment, very much liking the idea of shooting the man before him dead while at once admiring his resourcefulness, then smiled again, pulling from his pocket Jack's coveted compass; "Very well, but I've something better."

Gibbs stared, mouth gaping and Groves looked on in interest, for it was not the first time that he had seen fates turn because of that strange little trinket. "How did you get that?"

Barbossa relished his astonishment, "Given to me as a favor from a lover." He grinned. Groves shifted awkwardly and Gibbs seethed quietly for a moment. "Don't think too harshly on him, Gibbs. I'm sure his betrayal was completely unintentional."Hector added, and Gibbs stared at his chains a moment before in turn grinning himself. "But that won't point you to the Fountain."

"And why wouldn't it?"

"Because it only points to the thing your heart wants most."

Barbossa looked on for a moment, and then realizing his great oversight squeezed the compass so tightly both onlookers thought it would crack in his hand. "Sparrow!!"

Gibbs laughed, "Out done again, Barbossa! That compass will only ever point ye to Jack as long as ye feel for him, and there's no denying that you do, whatever folly it might be of yours and his."

Hector tucked the compass hurriedly away in his coat again before turning to leave, "Welcome back to the Navy, Mr. Gibbs." he muttered.

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> ** I omitted Jack's meeting with Angelica in the beginning. Why? Again I wrote this in 2011, and assumed anyone reading this would be familiar with the scene and not need a COMPLETE rehash. Also I hate Angelica.
>
> **Thalicia is an OC created by my co-author hellsingfanchick
> **Shandy is an adaptation from the Stranger Tides novel from which the movie drew inspiration and isn't mine though I love him

***

“Five days out,” Jack muttered, mostly to himself, for he was a daze of exhaustion and rarely seemed to know whether he was in company of others or not. His time aboard the fearsome Queen Anne’s Revenge had become a blur of work as he had been reduced to a mere deck hand. He found himself doing menial labor that he had not attended to himself since he was a young boy upon his father’s ship.

At night he slept little, as the crew’s quarters were dank and dark and overcrowded, and filled with a dangerous mixture of unfortunate blighters, whom like him had been shanghaied into the service, and dangerous cutthroats and thieves. And then of course, there were the most unsavory crewmen of all; the zombies.

Having Haitian roots of his own, Jack had seen and heard of strange and weird rituals from Vodou tribes, where high priests and priestesses were said to have the power to raise the recently dead and use them to do their bidding. Once as a child, in the company of his illustrious father Teague and his mother Thalicia, he thought he had even seen the ritual performed. But that memory was vague and not entirely real, for he felt he had dreamed much of it. But the dead men walking around on deck were certainly no dream.

Beside him then someone spoke, answering his statement and proving that he was not dreaming; “You can tell that by the smell of the sea?” Sparrow found himself staring into the smiling and dirt caked face of the man known only as Scrum; a portly youth who played the mandolin, had a drinking and gambling problem, and had tried to rob Sparrow while he was still under the affects the poison dart which had rendered him senseless, and easy pray for Angelica to bring aboard the ship.

Jack winced at him, wishing the other man wouldn’t lean so close. “By the smell of the crew.”

On his hands and knees he continued to scrub fiercely at the deck that wouldn't come clean, looking around at all the sullen and sorry faces surrounding him. Few stood out to him, save for Scrum's dirty and oddly optimistic features, the swarthy turban clad figure of the sailor known only as Salaman, and the wiry blonde youth whom served as cabin boy. And then of course, there was the missionary; Philip Swift.

Sparrow soured, looking at all of them. He couldn't think of a more useless rabble of miss-mates. Scrum was greedy and foolish, lofty and arrogant, and obviously a miserable coward for he had known exactly whom Jack was the moment he walked into that Pub and still allowed him to walk right into Angelica's trap. Salaman seemed to keep to himself, and his darkly tanned features were always furrowed and unpleasant looking. Jack knew that he must have been a former corsair, for his knowledge of sea-fairing life as admirable, and his disdain for laziness and clumsiness great and terrible. He'd be a good man in a fight, but not much for conversation.

Jack kept his eyes to the deck until the quartermaster had passed, and realized something. "Five days to sea and not once have I seen the captain of the putrid vessel."

"Count yourself lucky," a faint voice whispered in front of him, issued from the chapped lips of the young cabin boy. "To see Blackbeard is to see death, from what I'm told."

Sparrow eyed the lad, knowing he could not be more than thirteen. The Code strictly expressed, at least in more recent years, that lads no younger than seventeen could be press ganged, and that the rest were to be allowed to pass untroubled. Clearly however, Edward Teach was not interested in the pirate Code. Something Jack's father would be very interested to know. Seeing the fear in the young man's wide eyes, Jack felt pity and offered him a kind smile; "Oh, I don't think he's as terrible as all that."

"Oh yes he is." Scrum corrected, stopping in work now as well to join the conversation. "Remorseless, wicked and evil-minded the Captain is. I've heard tell from the crew that he's raided no less than twenty ships in the last six months, and not left one survivor to tell the tale." The captain eyed him through kohl darkened lids; "No survivors? Sounds completely unprofitable to me."

"What does he need with profit? The holds are busting with loot and swag. I nearly busted a gut the evening before last trying to move this chest full of rubies the size of my fist." the cherub-cheeked buccaneer claimed, grinning around at all of them. "No, they say he's after something more substantial, as it were."

Jack realized then that the crew did not know their destination. Of course not. If they did, they'd all be jumping ship like rats. Which gave him an idea...

There then came an abrupt, harsh crack of the whip followed by a scream. Sparrow flinched, nearly jumping out of his own skin when he saw the boy in front of him wail and fall flat upon the deck, curling in on himself as a bright streak of blood stood out across his back. The huge zombie, known to the crew as Gunner, held aloft the offending weapon; a blood speckled cat-of-nine-tails, ready to bring it down on the boy's back again.

Not even quite understanding his own actions, Jack jumped to the boy's defense, grabbing the corpse's arm and twisting it away. "Oy! He's only a child!" he bellowed. Gunner looked at him with his one unseeing eye; the other sown shut, and snarled before attempting to knock the other pirate away. But Jack abated another blow, pulling a small sharp dagger from his belt and driving it into the fiend's chest. For a moment the zombie stared at the wound, then growled gutturally as he

removed it from his person. He didn't even bleed.

Jack knew then that he was dealing with a true Zombi, and not some bewitched man, of which only the blackest magic could produce under the direction of a true vodun sorcerer; a bokor. Around him the crew trembled, and Philip muttered a prayer worriedly. "By Gods, they really are dead...!" Salaman gasped.

Gunner and Jack continued to stare at each other now, for the crew had come to a stand still, awaiting the impending brawl, and the other zombified officers were slowly shuffling towards the two men. "Do not hinder me," Gunner muttered, his voice a petulant snarl that would strike fear in even the most stout heart. His breath smelled of decay and Jack took a step back but would not relinquish his protective position over the bleeding child; "I demand parlay with the First Mate!" he found himself shouting, sounding much braver than he felt.

"Now you've done it, mate!" Scrum hissed next to him. "Should have let 'im take his lickin' like the rest of us!"

Sparrow glared at him again, "If you're not going to help me, at least stop breathing on me."

There was the hastened sound of boot falls then, too light to be a man's, and Jack saw the woman Angelica appear, her coattails waving behind her and the feathers in her hat fanning in the breeze. She did not look pleased; "What's going on here?!"

"Sweetness!" Jack grinned brightly, hoping to seem as charming and innocent as possible in order to prey upon any small amount of warm feeling this vicious and vengeful young woman might still have for him. "Seems we've come to a bit of an impasse as it were," he began, swaying jauntily on his feet for a moment before turning and motioning to the poor cabin boy and the missionary who now knelt beside him; "According to the Code; young sailors must be dealt with in accordance to their age; meaning any lad under proper age can not be subjected to the harsh punishments and penalties that other, more experienced pirates may. But your um...brute here, doesn't seem to want to listen."

The woman, though delicate and fair to the eyes, had all the bolstering of the most hardened and seasoned sailors. She looked quickly from the wounded whelp to Jack to the zombie Gunner and stepped between the two. "We don't keep to your precious Code, Jack." she stated smoothly. "There are different rules to be abided by here. You should not have interfered in Gunner's discipline."

At this the pirate seemed stunned. Angelica was cunning, but he had never thought her to be cruel. "You would let that abomination lay so much as a finger upon that whelp? He'll kill him!"

Angelica glanced again at the boy and there was a spark of pity in her dark eyes. For a moment she seemed conflicted, then she turned to Jack again. "Very well. If the punishment be too harsh for the child, then you shall bare it instead."

"What?"

"Lash him to the mast!"

Jack began to protest hurriedly, but both Scrum and Gunner had already grabbed him by the elbows and were hoisting him forward until he was flung face-first against the solid girth of the mizzenmast, and stripped him of his waist coat and shirt before his wrists bound tightly around it, unable to move.

“I’ll just hold these for you, sir.” Scrum grinned, dirty fingers splaying over the silk fabric of Sparrow’s waistcoat, checking the pockets for other valuables. Jack tried to grab at him, but he was too far out of reach.

“Angelica! Angelica, darling, perhaps we could talk this over? In your cabin?” he begged, feeling panic quickly welling in his stomach. The woman stood beside him, looking stern and unyielding. “I’m sorry, Jack. But I can not allow you to manipulate this crew with your treachery.” She leaned a little closer, stroking his cheek with her delicate hand; “Consider it the beginning of your penance to me.”

She nodded to the Gunner, who grinned hideously and brought the whip down across Sparrow’s unprotected back and shoulders. Jack gave a yell at the shock of the blow, then resolved to grit his teeth and not utter another sound. The next blow fell below his shoulder blades and wrapped around his ribs, and Jack felt skin come away and blood run freely down his torso.

Beside him, Philip suddenly surged forward, grabbing Angelica’s hand as she surveyed the beating. “Stop this! Stop this torment, now!” he pleaded. “I know you, dear lady, you are a good Christian woman. You have no wish to see an innocent man suffer! Find pity in your heart and forgive him his trespass!”

Jack hissed loudly as the whip cracked across him again, more brutally now as Gunner was beginning to find his rhythm and throw all of his weight into each swing. Already the freshly mopped deck beneath Jack’s bare feet was becoming blood speckled.

The woman looked to the man whom she had spared from death in Blackbeard’s raid, “I granted you mercy once, sir. Do not think that I would be so forgiving the next time.” She glared harshly on at Jack, watching his face contort with pain, “He has much to pay for.”

The lash fell a fourth and a fifth time, and finally the First Mate cried halt. Jack could not keep his feet and let himself dangle against the mast, allowing the sturdy beam to hold him up. The moment that Gunner had turned away, the missionary moved forward to undo Jack’s bonds. Angelica deftly tapped his reaching hand with the blade of her cutlass, “Leave him!”

Philip gawked at her, for clearly he thought more highly of the young woman than he had the rest of the crew, seeing her as someone of reason. In that moment however, she proved that appearances were not always as they seem, and the kindness she would bestow on one man, would not necessarily be gained by another. She swept some of Jack’s sweat dampened hair from his face as she spoke to him; “You must suffer to learn humility. Use this time constructively, won’t you darling?” She kissed his cheek and moved away, leaving the other men staring.

The pain gave over to lightheaded-ness, and Jack knew he would soon black out all together from it. That at least would be of some comfort. Before letting go, his eyes fell on the heaving ocean off the horizon and he prayed to whatever God or deity would listen that Hector was not far off.

His reprieve was short. Jack opened his eyes again to find that not but two hours had passed, and the sun was just beginning to sink low in the Western sky. He heard the sound of sloshing water, and peered to his right to see the cabin boy standing next to him with a bucket of drinking water and a ladle. “Here captain,” the youth spoke softly, holding the spoon up for Jack to drink from. He

did the best he could, though most of it dripped down his chin. “Thankee, lad...”

“‘S least I can do, sir, after what you did for me.” he grinned sympathetically. “A true gentlemen of honor you are Captain Jack.” The pirate tried to laugh, but the pain in his back seared through him and made him loose his mirth. “Honor is somewhat exaggerated.” he muttered, and the boy gave him a second drink before turning and motioning to Philip, who came to unbind Jack’s hands. The rope had dug into his wrists, causing angry red burns upon the skin. Once unlashed, Sparrow attempted to gain his footing, but was still light-headed and allowed himself to be shouldered by the stronger and younger Philip, who bore him easily below deck.

There in the dark and stench of sweat, fear and drink, Jack let himself be stretched out, stomach first across a barrel while Philip and Salaman did their best to clean the wounds, stitching up the deepest ones, and bind them.

“I’ve seen fools before, but you must be the biggest, Captain Sparrow.” Salaman said, glaring in the dim light of the lantern perched next to them as he dragged the needle through Jack’s skin with expert precision.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Jack winced. “My soul I do pledge for a drink of rum.” he muttered then, wishing for something to numb the pain. The boy produced a bottle from beneath the folds of his oversized vest and Jack managed a smile; “Thank you, lad! I’m taking a shine to you, I am.” He pulled off the cork with his teeth and downed a hefty swig.

“My name’s Shandy,” the boy replied proudly. “Well, actually it’s Joseph Chandagnac, but most people here can’t pronounce it rightly. So they just call me Shandy, when they call me anything at all.”

“Quiet, boy, let me work.” Salaman chided and drew the needle through again and Jack yelped with the pain of it.

Philip leaned in then, offering him a rag to bite on, but Jack shunned it and took another swig of rum, already feeling a pleasant tingling numbness in his face and fingers. “You should not take your soul so lightly, captain,” the handsome youth spoke; “For it is certain it is in great danger aboard this vessel.”

“Wisely spoken.”

The Cabin boy searched his pockets for something and produced from it a small object shaped like a marble of a clear sea-blue and offered it to the injured pirate. “I haven’t much sir, but it’s a small token of my appreciation.” he said gratefully, pressing it into Jack’s palm. “It’s a bit of sea glass I found on shore, the night before I was press ganged. It’s always brought me comfort, sir. I hope it will do the same for you.”

The pirate turned the little ball over his hand, admiring it’s color, which so reminded him of Hector’s eyes, and decided that it was a comfort. “I shall keep it close, for luck.” He said, pulling loose a small braid in his hair and binding the tiny trinket into it as he had so often done before. It looked like a sapphire glowing in the candle light. Shandy grinned proudly, feeling very important as Jack shook his hand; “Captain Jack Sparrow. Should you ever decide to go pirating again lad, I would be glad to have ye aboard.”

“Oh yes sir! Yes sir indeed!”

Philip shook his head, admonishing, but his warnings went unheeded. He was clearly pandering to the wrong audience.

Jack looked up then and found Scrum playing his mandolin in his hammock, treating Jack's stolen clothing as a pillow. "Are you through?" the pirate muttered, pushing himself to his feet. Philip reached for him, but Jack shooed him off, and after staggering for only a moment, made a straight line for the minstrel.

He roughly grabbed his coat and shirt from beneath Scrum's head, giving it a violent jerk that sent the other man flat upon the floor, his instrument twanging pitifully. "These are mine, you rotter! Now I shall have to drag them behind the ship just to rid of the stench you've laid on them!"

"Alright, Captain, alright! Take them, it's yours!"

Sparrow fumbled for his pistol, remembered that it had been removed long ago and resolved to kill the man with his own bare hands. He grabbed Scrum around his fat thick neck and shook him; "You're making a dangerous enemy, mate! And a slow-witted opportunistic little cur like you can't afford to be doing as such, savvy?"

"I'm far more scared of Angelica than I am of you, Captain Sparrow. No offense."

"And what do you know of the woman?"

"Besides that she's the beloved daughter of Blackbeard himself? Try to harm her, and your fate will be most terrible. I don't want to go ending up like officers, I don't. With me eyes and mouth sown shut to keep my soul from escaping my dead and bedeviled corpse! No thank you, sir!"

Jack dropped him, feeling too drained to carry out his death threat. "Yes, there is most defiantly something foul and unnatural aboard this ship." He looked around at all the watchful faces in the lantern and candle light, all looking to him. Sparrow realized that the greatest thing that these people lacked was a common leader among them, and that he himself had unwittingly provided them with one. "What's our heading?"

"No one knows," an old man by the name of Eziekeil croaked from a corner, his tri-corner hat dipped over his long ragged grey hair. "Some say it's for the Americas and the New World, but I can't be certain. The First Mate keeps our destination close to the vest."

"With good reason," Jack replied, scratching his chin. "Gents, I regret to inform you that death lies before us...at The Fountain of Youth."

This incited a clamor and uproar among them, and Jack had to shout to regain their attention. "And you would be right to panic! For everyone knows that the way to the Fountain is treacherous–nay! Cursed! But there is a solution."

Their eyes looked at him eagerly in the dark, hoping that he would somehow save their souls from this terrible fate. Sparrow took a breath, collecting his thoughts. He never thought he would be uttering these words, but desperate times called for desperate and despicable measures. "The only resolve gents... is mutiny."

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Miles away, unaware of the dangers which they shared their course with, Barbossa was contemplating much the same subject, but from the other end of the spectrum. He had just delivered the hard news of their destination; the weird and cursed shores of Whitecap Bay; a name dreaded by all sailors, and with good reasons. Mermaids dwelt in those waters, which in early summer they made their breeding grounds. The sirens of the deep had been known, since ancient times, to call ships to their doom upon reefs and shoals, and to drag entranced sailors down to a watery grave beneath the waves. Some who had never seen them swore that the beautiful and deadly creatures were not but myth. But Hector Barbossa knew better.

For the moment, the crew was sated by his assurances of their courage and of their higher purpose, handed down to them from God and country. Barbossa almost felt sorry for the gullible lot. They were willing to risk life and limb for a King who would never know their names, nor care enough to learn them. It had always been one of the chief reasons that Hector chose the life he had, not that he had always had a choice. He'd been like them once, after all, in a time he'd almost forgotten about. He'd been a bright eyed lad with a hunger for adventure and thirst to see the world and find something better. He had been a mere fifteen years old when the ship he was sailing on was taken by pirates in an ambush and he was left behind to drown...were it not for one very curious son of a pirate lord named Sao Feng.

Barbossa stood at the stern, watching the wake behind his ship as the foam churned in the deep blue water and tried to reconcile how he had ended up here as Admiral in the King's Navy, worn and suitably withered from the hard life he'd lived, and once again without Jack at his side.

His fingers played over the compass that was tucked into his belt, and for a moment he toyed with the notion of pulling it out to test it's strange abilities when he heard an approach from behind. "Admiral Barbossa, sir,"

Hector grinned, hearing the crisp tones of his first officer, Lt. Groves speaking to him. He turned, leaning heavily upon the oak crutch that supported him and eyed the young man coolly, for his features were hard-set and determined. "Yes, Lieutenant?" He hobbled over to the table he'd had set and eased himself down into a chair, picking up his tea cup and resuming drinking as Groves looked on stiffly.

"Sir, I must speak to you in regards to your speech to the men."

"I thought it was rather inspiring, was it not?" he asked airily, pretending to be untroubled and unconcerned. "Yes sir, however–,"

" 'However'?" Hector repeated, loving the look of frustrated indignity upon the young man's handsome face and he struggled to keep his composure. Barbossa wasn't sure why he enjoyed watching Groves squirm so much, but he couldn't deny that he did. Finally a bit of Groves' stoic demeanor dropped and he stepped closer to the Admiral. "Permission to speak freely, sir."

Hector smiled broadly against the lip of the porcelain china tea cup and set it aside, "This should be interesting. Permission granted."

At this Groves put both hands upon the table, leaning towards him and looking him hard in the face; “I think you’re making a grave mistake leading us into those dangerous waters. And I think you know it as well.”

His dark eyes, almond shaped below dark arched brows were looking at him with intensity and uncertainty, searching Barbossa’s face for some reaction to his accusation. But Hector remained calm, unconcerned, drinking in that hungry look from the young man. There was fire there, and survival instinct. How else had he managed to live through such calamities as the sinking of The Endeavor and the take over of The Flying Dutchman?

“Be that a fact?”

“I think you mean to use this ship and it’s crew to your own ends, and when it is of greatest profit to you, you shall abandon your vows to the King and your station and take the Fountain for yourself. Or perhaps, you and your former buccaneer crewmen.”

“Are you accusing me of being disloyal to the crown, Mr. Groves?”

It was this blunt statement that made the tan skinned officer pale a little and he quickly straightened up, looking worried and properly chastised. “No, sir. Forgive me. I am only concerned for the crew.”

Barbossa reached for an apple slice from the silver tray next to him, but his fingers were shaking and so he disregarded it, curling his gloved hand into a fist and letting it rest upon the table to stem the tremors. He was in growing pain from his leg, but now was not the time to show weakness; “I think ye be concerned for yourself, Lieutenant.” he answered crisply. “I think it gnaws at you, as I’ve said before, to serve under a man of my station.”

“And what station is that, sir?”

“Commoner. Peasant. Pirate.” He grinned as he drew out the last word, his former accent coming through clearly though he tried to contain it. His eyes glinted in sunlight and Groves felt another shiver, for there was no denying that there was an indomitable spirit lingering inside the aging husk of the man in front of him.

“That’s absurd.” he muttered, but Hector continued; “Is it now? Tell me, Groves, how long have you been in the King’s service?”

“Twelve years sir.”

“Twelves years. And yet you were last promoted under the command of Cutler Beckett, and that, as I understand it, was due to a state of emergency perceived by his lordship, was it not?”

“Yes.” Groves gritted his teeth as he answered, his palms beginning to sweat. He did not like what Barbossa was implying; that he had only received the promotion because Beckett felt himself short handed. “I earned that title.”

“Aye. I’m sure you did, lad. Brought many a dangerous cutthroat to justice did you for the act of piracy? The likes of women and children too, for facilitating it. Or were they just collateral damage?”

“That goes too far, sir!” Groves blustered then, slamming his fist upon the table. Hector was up then with surprising speed and had rounded on the man, pinning him against the table, which

shook, spilling tea and sugar across the table cloth; “I’d suppose you’d like to see a noose around my neck as well for my crimes, wouldn’t you?”

He was pinning the man in place, arms on either side of him, crutch fallen to the deck forgotten. Groves stared back at him, breathing rather quickly and shallowly, eyes staring into the older man’s strange blue orbs. “No sir...I believe Lord Beckett’s practices were a gross miscarriage of justice. But, under such tyranny...I could not oppose them freely.”

“So you be a coward then, too?”

Groves made to strike him, but Barbossa caught his hand and held it fast. “Release me!”

“Aye, I will, but not before you tell me the truth, young master! I want to hear the words from your lips! The real reason you’ve been snarling and sneering after me these last few months since I gained command. Out with it!”

Groves opened his mouth to speak, but could find no words. He was breathless by how close he was to the other man and the intensity he felt from him. Rational thought had fled. There was no protocol for these actions, no proper form in society to which he could reference and respond accordingly. And though this frightened him, it invigorated him too.

At either side of him, he could feel the table shaking and realized the tremors were emanating from Barbossa, who seemed to be losing the silent battle he’d been waging against his handicap. “Admiral, sir, you’re shaking.”

“It’s nothing.” Hector growled.

“Please, let me...” Groves didn’t wait for an affirmative response from his superior and stood, getting his arms beneath the greying red head and helping him into his seat. It was as he was reaching for the Admiral’s fallen crutch that Barbossa did something that all together shocked him; grabbing him by the front of his vest and hoisting him onto his lap.

“Sir!”

“Be still! You’re not off the hook yet,” Hector replied, looking up into the young man’s red and stunned face, noticing that he was sweating and his eyes were bigger than he’d ever seen them. “I find you intriguing, Lieutenant, I must be frank on that matter.”

“I...don’t understand.”

“I think you’re a fine sailor, a credit to the King’s Navy. But as to your personality...I need more convincing.” Groves gulped then when he felt the other man’s hand reach beneath him and cup his ass, giving it a hard squeeze. He was up again as quickly as if he’d sat on a pitch fork, flustered and stuttering. “Sir! Sir, what are you suggesting?!”

Barbossa just laughed, squeezing his own throbbing leg in an effort to keep the pain at bay and shook his head. “Relax, Lieutenant Groves. I meant no harm. You won’t begrudge an old man his small pleasures, would you?”

“What’s going on here?”

Gibbs sudden appeared at the rail of the stairs, looking curiously between the two men. Barbossa struggled to reach his crutch, and Groves bent and handed it to him gingerly. “Nothing to concern yourself with, Master Gibbs.” he said, limping along. “I’m tired. I’ll be in my quarters. Tell the helmsman to take her two points west and follow the sun as she sets.”

“Aye, Admiral.” Gibbs nodded, looking cautiously to Groves, who was staring after Barbossa, lost in thought. He’d seen that face on another young man before, and seeing it now made him bluster, and so Gibbs chased after the limping man, approaching him just as he entered his cabin.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?”

“How’s that?” Some of the humor had gone out of Barbossa’s voice as he strained forward. He leaned upon his desk, fumbling in a drawer for a tiny bottle, which he uncorked and drank from liberally. The sick sweet smell of it made Gibbs realize that it was a tiny vial of Laudanum, which must have been prescribed for the pain.

“Just what are you intentions with that boy out there?”

“What boy?”

“Groves, ye old blighter!” the old sailor bellowed back, growing frustrated. “Have you forgotten Jack so quickly?” He asked.

Hector turned sharply towards him, face hard and angry and for a moment Gibbs feared for his neck; “NEVER question my feelings for that man, Joshamee Gibbs! By the powers, I’ll see you flogged–!” He made to attack him, but then fell hard to the floor. Gibbs shouted, moving to his side. Barbossa groaned and pushed himself up on his elbows; “Don’t help me,” he muttered painfully, dragging himself up little by little, though it was obvious cost him greatly. Finally he managed a sitting position near his bed, and used the corners of it to drag himself once more into a leaning position against it’s inlaid frame. Gibbs watched him piteously, for it struck even him as tragic to see a great and fearsome man like Hector Barbossa laid low.

“You be a stubborn old sea monster, Hector Barbossa. What Jack sees in ye, I’ll never understand.” he said then, shaking his head. Breathless, Barbossa nodded, trying to push his loose hair from his face. “Neither will I, Mr. Gibbs. Neither will I. But I do love him, damn me, with all my heart.”

“Then what are ye doing dallying with that young officer back there? And don’t say you weren’t, cause I know flirting when I see it, and that was exactly it.”

“Just a bit of fun. It’s nothing of importance.” the former pirate answered, finally allowing himself to sink upon the mattress of his bed in order to remove the wooden peg from his stump and allow it’s tense muscles and frayed nerves a bit of rest. He swore at times he could still feel the rest of the leg below it, and even at times the bone chilling pain caused by it’s removal.

“Really?” Gibbs mocked. “Looked to me as you fancy him.” He shook his head, smoothing back his slick grey-black hair and looking at the other man carefully; “It would be a shame to be toying with his affections like that, especially given present company. You might sorely regret that you did. As for meself, I’d hate to see another young man broken by your careless feelings.”

This seemed to lull Hector into silence and his eyes fell upon the floor, becoming the picture of melancholy. “I regret those ill fated decisions, Mr. Gibbs. You can never know how much so.”

“Then don’t repeat them.”

Hector smoothed back his hair, finding more grey and white streaks than he thought were present previously and sighed heavily; “Aye, perhaps you’re right.” He drew from his pocket Jack’s compass and flipped open the lid, expecting the needle to point back the way they had come from London’s shores. Instead, the needle spun for several seconds before pointing westward, in the very direction of their own heading. Barbossa eyed it skeptically, giving it a little shake. “Damnable thing. Must have broken it in that little tumble,” he muttered.

“What’s wrong?”

He peered over as the Admiral shook the compass again, but the needle remained pointing stubbornly westward. “Mr. Gibbs, what be our heading?”

“Due West sir, per your instruction.”

“Help me.” He gestured for the man to hand him his crutch and lift him into a standing position again. Together the two old sea dogs limped out onto deck, Barbossa hopping his way up to the helm with surprising nimbleness. “Change heading, two points!” he barked.

The helmsman looked startled but did as he was told. Hector held out the compass as he and Gibbs stared. Sure enough, they moved, and the needle move accordingly still pointing westward.

“But that’s impossible. Jack’s still in London, where we left him.”

Barbossa stared worriedly out at sea, ordering the confused helmsman to correct course and put them back where they were. Again the compass compensated. “Are you sure of that, Mr. Gibbs?”

Jack’s first mate seemed to mull it over, scowling out into the ocean, then his face became pale and concerned. “Oh no...unless it’s true what they were saying.”

“What? Out with it man?”

“I heard rumors during my brief and uncomfortable stay in the city, of another ship bound for the Fountain of Youth. A pirate ship.”

“Could be any number of scallywags after such a prize.”

Gibbs shook his head warily, eyeing Barbossa with the deepest concern. “Not just any pirate. THE pirate. The one all others fear. Edward Teach.”

The old sailor saw a dark cloud pass over Barbossa’s face and gripped the compass sharply, leaning against the rail for support as he stared out into the horizon. “Blackbeard. Damn me for a fool, I should have seen it.” He gripped Gibb’s arm. “Mr. Gibbs, I fear our mutual friend is in very serious danger.”

“Aye, that be the truth of it.” he gulped.

Barbossa rallied with renewed purpose. “Full canvas! Get those sails down boys! We’ll ride these winds while they last! We’ll reach that Fountain first, if costs us every man we have!”

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> ** This chapter has non-con sexual encounters and a lot of creepy shit done by Blackbeard, read at your own risk, otherwise skip ahead or jump ship now mates. I'd rather you read safely than worry about views

Once more, Sparrow found himself being hauled across the deck by an unsavory figure. The quartermaster, with his bloated girth, might have looked angry if he could really muster any emotion at all in his reanimated corpse. But of all the zombie officers, Jack decided he preferred this one the most, for he seemed less inclined to do physical damage than the others. “What do you say we let by-gones be by-gones and just forget about this whole thing, mate? I mean...someone’s already fried tonight, as it were.” Jack whispered. The brute gazed at him blankly and grunted, and the pirate guessed that it meant that he wasn’t falling for his fast talk. “Worth a try, I guess...” he sighed.

He was dragged up the steps to Blackbeard’s cabin and pinned roughly to a beam, a dagger lodged in the collar of his shirt to keep him from trying to escape. The interior of the feared pirate captain’s quarters seemed fitting of all the legends Jack had ever heard about the feared man. It was lavishness and avarice to the extreme, for not even the Black Pearl in her hay day, nor even his father’s illustrious ship had ever held so many treasures; nor such fearsome trappings. The combination of the two reminded Jack of the huts he’d encountered in the cannibal tribe, which had been filled with the heathens’ own dark treasures of bones and skulls and shrunken heads, in addition to all they had pilfered from the unfortunate representatives of the East India Trading Company.

But nothing stood out as clearly as the tall cathedral like window at Blackbeard’s back, illuminated by the giant lantern outside. The delicate stained glass depicted an image most foul; burning skeletons with their arms stretched aloft, as if grasping for Heaven even as they were pulled down in the fiery pit of Hell itself. Jack thought again of the unfortunate cook, whom had been burned alive as punishment for his mutiny, and felt a stab of guilt.

The captain himself, the old devil, seemed untroubled. He sat leisurely at his table, scattered with sea charts and maps, wax dripping skulls and all sorts of strange instruments of alchemy and magic. He was fiddling with one in particular, though Jack could not make out quite what it was for the distance between them.

“Captain Jack Sparrow,” the heavily bearded man began at length, his dark eyes flickering briefly towards his captive. “You are every bit the scoundrel I’ve heard of.”

“Thank you kindly.” Jack attempted a little bow, but could not move more than an inch or two. “But rumors of my prowess may have been exaggerated–,”

“Do not speak.” the older man snapped, his dark lined eyes piercing Sparrow and rendering him suddenly and effectively silent. “Your words are your true weapon. They surround you like a fog, make you hard to see. But I am not fooled by them.” He stood slowly, his heavy, steel-toed boots clunking upon the floor as he walked, and his ominous figure cast a long dark shadow behind him in the firelight that Jack was not sure could be real. He looked more closely at the captive pirate, surveying him in detail for the first time; “You look much like your father.”

“Friendly with the notorious Captain Teague, are you?” Jack grinned. Edward Teach gave him a cold smile; “You might say that he gave my first taste for piracy all those long years ago.”

“I’ll send him your regards then, shall I?”

The pirate turned away, circling his captive. “You’ll not see him again in this life.”

Jack felt cold, for that felt as much a promise as if Teach could see his future clearly before him. Maybe he did. “My daughter has told you of the prophecy?”

“Yes,” Jack answered, a bit more hoarsely. He glared at the dark man, “The mighty Blackbeard, running scared.”

“Scared?”

“To the Fountain.”

The man, mortally known as Edward Teach, feared by all as Blackbeard smiled again, showing his teeth this time. He removed the dagger binding Jack to the beam, grabbed his palm and sliced the edge of the blade across the tips of Jack’s fingers. He yelped, as Blackbeard squeezed the blood from his hand, capturing a small amount of it in a vial. Then he released him, turning once more to his table, leaving Jack confused and clutching his wounded hand; “Every soul has an appointment with death. In my case, I happen to know the exact time.” he retorted, taking up the object he’d previously been fawning over, wiping a bit of Jack’s spilt blood upon it. This peeked the captain’s curiosity and he moved closer, trying to see the object of interest.

“I must reach the fountain. It would be foolish to battle fate, but I am content to cheat it.” the bearded man replied, removing his tri-corner studded hat and setting it aside as he began to bind something around the tiny straw object in his hand. Something that looked like thread, but darker. “To abate your destined meeting with the ‘one-legged man’.” Jack continued.

“So she has told you everything.”

“Oh yes.” Sparrow leaned upon the table now as well, careful of his still bleeding hand. “Including her plan to delude you into thinking that she is your long lost child, thus winning your sympathies while she works in secret to steal your ship.”

The wicked captain looked at him blandly, seemingly uninterested in these accusations. “Oh really?”

“Trust me, Angelica is not whom she appears to be. She’s a wicked, deceitful, manipulative lying little–,” He was letting his own feelings of disdain and betrayal by the young woman bubble to the surface now, just as the door opened and she stepped briskly inside, black hair billowing around her

bare shoulders.

“Darling!”

“Father, do not listen to this scoundrel!” she sat heatedly, staring from Jack to Blackbeard. “He means to deceive you to save his own neck.”

“I know, dear child,” the old man replied, ushering her to his side and she went, putting her thin arms around the grisly man’s shoulders and pressing a kiss to his forehead. Jack sneered at the two of them, complacent in their scheme. “He’s been quite adamant about impugning your character. And mine.”

“I’m not surprised.” the woman scoffed. “How’s your back, Jack?”

Sparrow’s eyes flashed, and he lifted a discarded skull from the table and made as if to heave it at her head, but felt himself suddenly paralyzed in motion. Unable to will his arm forward, as if it were being held back by some invisible restraint, Jack’s terrified eyes shifted hurriedly back to Blackbeard; for now he could see clearly what he’d been toying with. A doll, made from cloth and straw, fashioned in his own image, complete to the smallest detail of his red head scarf, beard, hair and waistcoat. A “voodoo doll” as some had called it. Jack’s mouth fell open in a fearful gape, for he knew the dark purposes of such instruments of Vodun magic. He could barely believe that Blackbeard himself had learned the dark native arts.

“Are you frightened, Jack?”

“How did you–?”

“I’ve been to many foreign shores. Seen the world beneath the walls of class, civility and common society. I’ve always had a taste for the occult; and never did I find more potent uses of it, or more willing teachers than in the jungles of Haiti and Africa. There I learned what it was to be more than a man; to be a God among men. To bend the will of another to your own.”

He gave the doll’s arm a little jolt, and Jack felt the skull knocked from his hand and was suddenly released from his frozen position, gasping. “But I’m sure the bastard child of Teague and his heathen lover would recognize true Vodou when he sees it.” He grinned brightly, his terrifying image backlit by that infernal window, and Jack felt truly as if he were standing before Evil itself.

“Mercy, father,” Angelica said then, though she sounded somewhat unconvincing. “You can not kill him. He is the only one who knows the path to the Fountain. Without his guidance, we will never reach it in time to save you.” She worriedly clutched the aging man’s hand and he looked at her adoringly even as he continued to clutch that infernal doll. “Saintly, is she not? Always concerned with her dear papa’s welfare. She’s more than I deserve.”

“Oh, I’d say you deserve each other.” Sparrow sneered, leering at the girl. “And you speak to me of salvation and cleansing my soul, while you ally yourself with this monster–AH!” Jack felt himself suddenly and abruptly knocked forward, as if some invisible force had given him a great push from behind, and he sprawled upon the table before the captain and his daughter.

“Father, no!”

“Silence!” Blackbeard looked at her harshly for a moment and stood, lifting the dagger from it’s place upon the table and pressing the tip of it against the mid section of the doll. Jack felt the prickling of steel against his skin, though clearly the knife was not touching him. He began to

sweat, and the salt stung the aching open wounds of his back.

“Let me be clear, Sparrow,” he spoke, giving the doll another little jerk in the opposite direction with the flick of his wrist, and Jack felt himself flung upright again and knocked back several steps. He was moving without any command from his own mind; a puppet dangling on strings. “You live because you are necessary.” He flung Jack backward, pinning him painfully to the wall. Sparrow bellowed and tried to wrench free of the spell, but could not. He had no inkling of how to counter the dark magic that had suddenly be thrust upon him. “The moment you become otherwise...” He drove the tip of the blade into the doll and Jack screamed again, feeling the skin upon his chest being sliced open. Angelica watched, wide eyed and silent as he father tortured the man she had strayed for. She had never seen him perform such a violent attack in this manner, and she was frightened by it.

“Father! Father stop! You’re killing him!”

Blackbeard finally halted in the nimble movements of his hand, and when he did Jack looked down to see blood staining the fabric of his shirt, turning it bloody red. With shaking hands Jack pulled away the edges to reveal a shape carved into his chest over his heart; a trident. “To put another way,” the pirate replied. “If I don’t make it to the fountain in time, neither will you.”

Angelica stepped close to the tortured pirate, staring at the blood wound etched in his skin, barely able to believe it’s existence. “Do you see now?” Jack rasped, still held in place, “Angelica, please, even you can not hate me this much! Open your eyes, see him for what he is!”

“You said you would stop,” the young woman chided then, looking for the first time, bitterly upon the man she claimed to be her kin; “You promised me no more torture!”

“See how she pleads for lennoaceae, Sparrow? Even for your worthless, sinful hide?” The captain praised, standing beside her now and taking her hands in his. “She prays for your deliverance. And I shall grant her it.” He kissed her cheek and drew Jack close to him. “Any mere man can inflict pain upon another. But a true master can do much more,” he spoke softly, turning the doll over in his hands, running his fingers over it.

Sparrow felt a strange sort of cloud come over his mind, like the numb, half-awareness of a dream. “Tell her you’re fine now, Jack.”

“I’m fine...” he repeated, though his voice was dull and emotionless. Blackbeard was speaking through him, forcing the words to form from his lips. Angelica looked confused, peering into Jack’s slack face and darkened eyes. “What’s happened to him?”

“I’ve taken his pain away. Was that not what you wished?”

“Yes, but...”

Suddenly the pain was gone, replaced by something else. Jack felt distinctly then as though he were being touched all across his body by hands that felt as real as his own but were entirely unseen to the eye. Invisible palms and fingers trailed across his neck and shoulders, down his back and across his chest, sliding and clawing and creeping across his stomach, gripping his hips and moving lightly between his thighs. As gasp of surprise and terror erupted from his lips at the sensation, and his frantic eyes flickered from the girl to the man in front of him, but neither were quite close enough to be touching him. “Stop it,” he muttered, his voice catching in his throat as the touching below his waist became more heated and insistent. “Stop touching me!”

His tormentor smiled disarmingly. “But I’m not touching you. I’m right here.” Angelica stared,

wide eyed and wondering from her father to his trembling victim. There was no doubt that Jack was experiencing something supernatural, but whether she didn't quite understand the nature of her father's spell, or simply chose not see it was unclear. "He's right. He's not touching you."

Sparrow moaned in spite of himself, unable to ignore the way his nerves were responding to the experience. His legs shook, and he was glad of the wall for support. "You've made your point, now let me be!" he gasped. "This will prove nothing–ah! Ah! Not there! Stop!"

"Still protesting, Jack? I showing you that I am not an unfeeling man. I have taken away your pain and replaced it with something more desirable. Do you deny this?"

Jack glared at him through hooded eyes, trying to catch his breath and suppress each little cry and moan that wanted to escape from him. "I...ah! Ah! I don't want this...not from you!"

"Are you sure?"

He muttered something under his breath and Jack felt a sudden jolt to his body as if he'd been literally assaulted, his head snapping back briefly and his eyes clouding over, becoming empty of light and consciousness for a moment. Angelica saw this ghastly change and gripped the beam behind Sparrow for support, feeling overwhelmed by this strange display of magic and will in front of her. She knew that she should turn aside and find someway to break the spell, but she could not bring herself to move. She was entranced by the sight Jack Sparrow, writhing in the throes of some dark elicit ecstacy that she could not see or understand.

Her father moved a bit closer as Jack struggled, still fondling the voodoo doll in his palm as the other moved to capture Sparrow's chin and bring him face to face with him. "Kiss me."

The bewitched pirate did so, pressing his lips firmly to the other man's and opening his mouth to allow the other man more intimate entry. Blackbeard sighed heavily into his mouth, putting his arm around Jack's waist and pulling the smaller man flush against him. His blood was pounding through his veins in the excitement brought on by conquering another, especially someone as wily and beautiful as Jack Sparrow. He hadn't expected himself to succumb so easily to something like lust, but neither was he a man to deny himself whatever he wanted. He had grown too powerful and too arrogant for such things. Were his daughter, or the woman who claimed to be so, not standing right there watching him he would have taken the man already. But such an act would force him to bend Jack's will for a longer period of time than he had yet exacted, and the energy to do so he lacked just then.

As if to illustrate this point, his hold on the man faltered briefly, and Jack blinked then, some of the light and awareness returning to him abruptly, and he bit viciously down into the other man's lip, causing him to yell and wrench away. Sparrow fell, like a puppet with it's strings cut, and struggled to lift himself up again. "Monster!"

"You keep saying that as if it will shock me," Teach muttered, wiping his bleeding lip on the back of his arm. "Hold him, daughter!" He yelled as Jack suddenly got to his feet and made to attack. Angelica fell on him, binding the weaker man's arms behind his back as they stood together, struggling. "You can not fight him, Jack! I will not let you harm him!"

"Angelica, so help me, I swear I'll–!" The pirate Teach began muttering darkly again over the bewitched doll of Jack Sparrow, and Jack felt himself besieged again by those invisible hands, which were harsher now, clawing and probing.

“This isn’t happening! It’s not real!” Sparrow spat, and in turn Teach bellowed with laughter, moving directly in front of him, and in his eyes Jack saw the flames of the window reflected. “That won’t work, Sparrow. Because you know that it is.”

He touched the man’s face and Jack screamed, for he felt just as surely then as if someone had put an icepick through his brain. And instantly, in his mind, he was no longer standing in that cabin, fighting against Angelica and Blackbeard. Instead he was in some dark, unknown place, naked and trapped beneath Blackbeard, who appeared more fierce and terrible in this fever dream than even in real life as he ravaged his body through his mind. Sparrow fought against the delusion, trying to escape and go elsewhere in subconscious, but he could not break from the Teach’s hold.

“Hector! Hector! Oh God, Hector help me!” he found himself crying out in the dark, frantic and helpless.

“You will submit to me, Sparrow. There is no other choice. Your will is mine, and I can choose whether you experience pleasure–“ He drove hard up into Jack, who bellowed and arched against him, certain that he had been impaled by the man in a manner no other lover had ever been able to achieve, “Or pain!”

Sparrow’s body jumped and jolted between the two, Blackbeard pressing hard into him and Angelica leaning into him to keep him still. The sounds coming from his mouth made the woman quiver, and to her own shame and surprise she felt herself instantly aroused by it. Teach attached his teeth to Jack’s throat, leaving a harsh, bleeding mark there as his one free hand groped between the man’s legs, reaching inside his breeches to claim what he already possessed mentally. Jack shouted and his hips swung forward harshly as Blackbeard finally granted him release. Jack’s unseeing eyes unclouded and he groaned, falling to the floor once more on his hands and knees, rasping for breath. Blackbeard grinned triumphantly above him, feeling satisfied in his domination of the other man.

The woman fell hard against the beam, her cheeks red as she panted. “What happened?” she gasped, dizzied by the experience and still woefully incomplete. Blackbeard grinned at her, smoothing the frayed edges of his braided and coarse beard as he stood over the other pirate. “Poor soul. Perhaps I have been too hard on you.”

He plucked the trembling pirate up into his lap as he sat upon one of his lavish arm chairs, feeling like a king on a throne. Jack could not protest, he couldn’t even speak. “Cruelty, Jack, is the way of the world, and so I must follow it. But I am not without pity for man who earns it.” He ran a hand down Sparrow’s shivering back, feeling the raw wounds underneath and sighed pleasurably. “You will show me the way to the fountain, and for this service, you will be rewarded.”

“You will not hurt him again?” Angelica asked worriedly, leaning beside the chair. She had never seen Jack look so broken or disheveled, though part of her relished his suffering, for surely she had suffered because of his lies. “Not unless he forces me to, sweet child.” The old pirate drew her nearer to him, putting his hand to her cheek and drawing her towards him. Jack couldn’t be sure in his current state, but he thought, just before he blacked out completely, that he thought he saw the two kiss.

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Miles away, Barbossa woke to a nightmare of his own. “Jack!” He cried out into the dark, bolting forward only to realize that he had never gone to bed, and had fallen asleep at his desk. Barbossa took a few deep breathes to calm himself and reacquaint himself with reality. The dream was already slipping from his mind, but it’s horrors lingered; Jack naked and bloody lying upon a bed of bones with the shadowy and ominous figure of Blackbeard standing over him, laughing in perverse joy.

He shook the nightmare image away and reached for the water pitcher across the table surface and poured himself a drink. It already began to taste stale and bitter, and would soon be undrinkable. The laudanum had left his body feeling groggy and sluggish, but his mind was already churning over the new problem at hand. It was one thing to have to compete with a Spanish fleet to reach the Fountain of Youth; it was quite another to race Blackbeard for it.

Hector had encountered The Queen Anne’s Revenge but once; the night he had lost The Black Pearl, and his leg. The awful night was still a blur in his mind, but he remembered clearly the wicked face of his attacker as he used his bedeviled sorcery to turn his own ship against him. He’d taken complete joy in watching the fear and horror on his crew’s faces as they tried to flee, and the terror on Barbossa’s when he realized that he must loose that battle. And Hector had lost, dearly. But not everything. Unlike the rest of his crew, he had managed to escape.

His wounded appendage sang with pain then and he clutched it tightly, gritting his teeth and waiting for the worst to pass. It was as though the severed limb was remembering along with him. Bitterly, Hector stood, digging in one of his cabinets for a hidden flask filled with rum that he had stowed away inside one of his heavy volumes of books. He threw away the cork and drank deeply, eager for a different kind of relief. The physical pains could be dealt with, but he could not escape the growing concern in his heart and mind for the fate of Jack Sparrow.

If the compass was right, and Jack was truly a prisoner aboard Blackbeard’s ship, there was little chance that he was not enduring some kind of mistreatment at the feared pirate captain’s hands. Of all the rumors and tall tales told about the man, one fact remained clear; Blackbeard enjoyed pain. Giving it, more precisely. And Jack had a terrible knack for getting himself into all sorts of trouble with that sharp tongue of his. He had certainly enjoyed Hector’s own anguish.

A mental image of Sparrow bent and screaming beneath the lash burst brightly into Hector’s mind, and he swallowed another hefty mouthful of rum to banish it.

“Steady now,” he told himself, staring out the windows of his cabin and the black churning water beyond and the bright star laden sky above. “Jack is more clever than you give him credit for. He’ll make himself too valuable to be killed out right, of that I’m certain.” It seemed like sound reasoning, but Hector felt little comfort from it. He took the compass in his hand, watching the needle spin lightly before point north west, which was exactly as his own heading was. He wished he could tell exactly how far ahead of them the pirate was, for then he could begin some sort of proper strategy for regaining his love, and their advantage.

There came a knock upon the door. “Enter.” Barbossa muttered thickly, swallowing another mouthful of liquor before tucking the flask away. The door opened tentatively, and in stepped

young Groves, whom had been standing watch.

“Admiral? Are you alright, sir? I heard a shout from your cabin.”

The old pirate hobbled about his desk until he fell heavily into his chair, still toying with Jack’s compass. “Nightmare, lad. Nothing more.”

Groves nodded, but did not retreat from the room. Instead he gingerly closed the door and stepped a little closer to the man behind the bureau. “Sir, about this afternoon, I must apologize for my behavior. It was disrespectful and completely out of line.”

Hector smiled sleepily at the man, already beginning to feel the pleasant warm numbness of drunkenness steal over him, aided by the lingering affects of his medication. He looked quite the pirate then, sitting there in his breeches and leggings, barefoot, and wearing only his shirt sleeves with all the lacings undone, exposing a bit of his bare chest. “Questioning authority is not a flaw, Master Groves. It is a little known strength. You were right to be concerned for the crew, and for yourself. I’m leading you into dangerous waters, and not even I can guess what the fate of this voyage might well be.” He let his head dip back against his chair, still looking sleepily at the handsome, if not slightly uptight sailor as he continued to approach him. “Your eyes are glassy.”

“Hmm?”

Groves tensed for a moment at Barbossa’s easy tone, then realized; “You’re drunk!”

“Nay, only sedated from an old man’s pain. Come now, lad, you can not tell me that you’ve never had a nip to ease yer worries from time to time.” the Admiral replied, toying with his crutch. Groves stood in front of him now, only separated by the corner of the bureau. “Drinking is a vice that is forbidden among officers, Admiral, as you should well know.” he reminded him, shaking his head tiredly. “I can not believe this...” He reached down as if to help Barbossa up, intending to put him into bed, but the Admiral surprised him by grabbing him by his collar and dragging him forward, so that he was leaning precariously over him; “You never answered my question, lad.”

“Sir?”

“What is it you hate so much about me?”

Groves stared into his eyes awhile and heard the pounding of his own heart in his ears as his mouth became suddenly dry. “I don’t...I don’t hate you, sir. In fact, I quite admire you. I have, ever since that day upon The Endeavor. Your bravery...I’d only heard stories of such things, until then.” Though Barbossa was not longer really holding him in place, he had not moved from his position over him. He liked the closeness, of being able to feel someone else’s body heat. “But I find your methods crass and crude. You have no respect for authority, not even your own! And you treat us as though we are sheep to be lead, blindly serving the crown, with no regard for our own lives! I am not one of those sheep, sir.”

Barbossa was looking at him now in a way no one ever had, and somehow the fearsome pirate seemed softer, younger, more human to him. He studied the lines of his face, and the strange scar that began at the lower lid of his right eye and ran down over his cheek bone, oddly shaped like a tear.

“Groves?”

Without thinking then, the young officer leaned abruptly forward, his lips crashing roughly with

Barbossa's in a surprise kiss. It was tight lipped, nervous and awkward. Barbossa blinked then smiled against his lips, trying to pull the younger man closer, but the officer jerked away then, looking startled, hand over his mouth.

"Oh God! Admiral, forgive me!" he gasped, turning away hurriedly, face deep red. He faced the wall, trying to compose himself. "I don't know what came over me just now! Sir, I'm so sorry."

"For what, lad?" Hector asked easily, and Groves glanced back at him, expecting to find him angry. Instead he was smiling, genuinely. "Have you ever kissed anyone before, Lieutenant?"

The tan skinned man of thirty balked, failing to see how that was relevant and flushing furiously in his awkward position. "Of course I have!"

"Who? Your mother?" the old pirate chuckled. "If you be meaning to kiss someone, you have to do it with a bit more feeling than that." He stood up then with surprising ease, took two great striding steps towards the younger man, pinning him to the wall, and kissed him again. Groves gasped into his mouth, allowing the more experienced man to part his lips with his own, kissing him warmly and firmly. The officer could taste the rum on Hector's lips just before he pulled away. "Much better."

"Admiral...you're not in your right mind. We shouldn't be doing this."

Barbossa smirked and drove his one good knee between the younger man's shivering legs, feeling the warm beginnings of an erection pressing against his thigh. Groves gave a little groan in response and Barbossa chuckled against his cheek. "Quit hiding behind rank, Lieutenant. If ye be so concerned about my state of mind, why don't we sit and talk awhile?"

He backed away then, sitting down once more and turned to his peg leg. Groves watched, rather curiously, as Barbossa unscrewed the lower part of the leg, revealing the peg itself to be hollow, containing inside a secret store of rum. He was fascinated by the ingeniousness of the invention, if not slightly appalled at the same time. "Hand me those cups over there." the older man instructed. The Lieutenant did not even bother to protest the idea of drinking, for he knew it was useless to argue at this conjuncture. Besides, he almost felt he needed something to calm him after that impetuous kiss.

Hector poured them both a liberal shot or two of rum in the old tin cups, then replaced his leg; "Now then, I have a few questions to put to ye;" he began. "I'm guessing from your technique, or lack thereof, that you've never dabbled much in romantic endeavors."

"No sir." He reached for the cup, took a drink and promptly coughed and sputtered as Barbossa struggled not to laugh. "God!" the young man wheezed, suddenly hoarse; "what's in that?!"

"Spiced rum, good and strong the way a proper man should drink it." his superior replied, taking a drink from his own cup, his cheeks turning a bit pinker as result. Once Groves recovered his voice, taking another tentative swig of the alcohol, he spoke again; "I'm afraid I never had much time to pursue romance. My parents so hoped to see me marry, but I must admit...I've just never had an interest in it."

"Few sailors do," Hector nodded, feeling more numb and relaxed by the minute, subdued by the company of the man who had for months been exchanging awkward glances with him. "They pledge themselves to the sea, knowing well that they may never again see shore. It's the nature of the beast. Calypso can be very fickle." Suddenly everything else seemed very far away. "Which goes to my next question. Ever been with a man?"

The other man did not answer at once and nervously took another deep drink. Hector reached for his cup, tipping it away, “Slow down, lest you want it to hit you all at once!”

“I’m fine. Really.”

To Hector’s astonishment he finished the glass in two rough gulps, coughing harshly again afterwards. He cringed a little. For a man with no former heavy drinking experience, this surely spelt disaster. “And no. I’ve never been...” He frowned anxiously for a minute and then looked Barbossa hard in the eye; “But you have.”

The Admiral laughed at his forwardness and took another drink himself. “Aye! There have been a few in this old sea dog’s life that have turned my fancy.” He continued to chuckle fondly, smoothing the red waves of his beard and mustache.

“Like Jack Sparrow?”

Hector’s smile faltered then and he turned his gaze wistfully upon the compass again. “That is something else entirely.” But Groves pressed onward; he didn’t know why, but he suddenly felt emboldened by this new friendly exchange between himself and the legendary Barbossa. Already there was a tingling forming in his fingers and even at the back of his eyes. He felt warm and relaxed. More so than he had in weeks. “I heard you together...that night in the Palace. I was keeping watch...and...my, I feel so funny suddenly.”

Barbossa stood then, “I think perhaps I’ve made an error in judgement,” he said. “I shouldn’t have invited you in here. You should be keeping watch, properly.”

“But we were talking!” the other man gasped, standing up suddenly and finding that he swayed unsteadily upon his feet, that tingling and warm numbness spreading. “Aye, we were, and now we’re not.” Hector said, suddenly feeling guarded. His feelings for Jack were private and deep, and he did not wish to go on about them to some drunken virginal fool. He watched the young man fumble along the edge of his table and groaned, realizing he was now too drunk to be a proper look out. “I relieve you of your duties, Groves. Go below deck, sleep it off.”

He started to turn away, but to his great surprise the young man grabbed his hand and tugged him back towards him; “You love him, don’t you?” He glared hard into Barbossa’s face, as if accusing him of something. Hector, suitably intoxicated himself, leered back. “Don’t attempt to speak on a subject ye know nothing about!”

“Then teach me!”

Hector stared as the younger man grappled with him, knocking him against the windows of his cabin with a look of desperation in his dark eyes. “What?” he laughed nervously.

“Please...sir, I...I don’t want to go on not knowing what it’s like to care for someone. To be with someone. Take pity on me, sir...!”

Barbossa tried to push him off, but couldn’t get proper leverage. “You’re drunk, Theodore.”

“I’m telling the truth!”

“I’m twice your age!”

“I don’t care!” He didn’t, he realized. He grabbed the other man by both sides of his head and drew

him into another kiss, this one a bit more heated and considerably more sloppy than the first. Barbossa tried to pull free from it, but Groves was stronger than he gave it credit for, and eager to prove something. He gave up quickly then, surrendering to it and letting the other man pin him against the glass. He needed some kind of comfort now, and he could think of worse places to find it. And he would be lying if he claimed that he hadn't wanted this for awhile, perhaps only half-heartedly then. He held the officer close to him, wrapping his arms around his back and shoulders and coaxing him into a deeper kiss. Groves clumsily groped at the older man, attempting not only to keep his balance but to show him that he wasn't completely clueless in the ways of seduction. After all, every man has some ingrained instincts when it comes to love making.

His hand ventured curiously along the length of Barbossa's left thigh, upward towards his hip, trying to untuck his shirt and briefly gliding over the growing warm bulge between his thighs. Hector hissed at the brief contact and smiled; "You're skimming along dangerous waters," he purred, bending his head back so that the younger man could kiss his neck and shoulders. "Best stop while you're ahead."

The younger tan man looked up at him, abashed; "But I want...!"

"You don't know what you want." Hector replied seriously. He held his head for a moment, feeling a bit lightheaded between the intoxicating mix of alcohol, drugs and possible sex. He pushed him back gently, trying to give them both room to breathe. He was surprise to see the look of doubt and disappointment that crossed Grove's chiseled features. "You don't find me attractive."

"Are ye mad?!" Hector cackled in response, making himself wince a little at the harshness of his own voice. "You're more than pretty enough, lad. Tall and dark and tan with those eyes of yours..." He barely realized what he was saying, but Theodore Groves was eating up every word and drew him back into another kiss before leaning down to nip lightly at the Admiral's milky white collar bone. Hector hissed, clutching the back of Grove's jacket; "Jack...!"

"Sir?"

Barbossa blinked, his head swimming more than ever. "Nothing."

The younger man continued his curious exploration in the realms of male sexuality, feeling himself grow drunker and bolder all the time. The rum had obliterated all of his nervous preconceptions, and he suddenly found that he didn't really care whether any fo this was right or wrong in anyone's eyes. He wanted Barbossa, and even now he couldn't be sure why he'd chosen him, but he knew he couldn't go on like he had before; pretending he was content with the hand life had dealt him, living safely on the edge of everything and never getting too close.

Hector pulled him out of his jacket and knocked the wig from his head, flinging it across the cabin, revealing a head of shorn black hair. The other man's hands were at his breeches again, trying to undo the buttons while running curiously over the straining erection beneath. His hand reached down and found Theodore's, stopping him. "You wouldn't know what to do with it if you had it, boy." he muttered. His partner looked completely abashed by this statement, though it was well founded. "I take offense, Admiral."

Barbossa laughed again; " 'Admiral' this, 'Sir', that...there's not much pirate in ya, is there?" He surprised Groves then by backing him up against the windows instead, reaching him between his legs and gripping him possessively, earning a small cry of pleasure from the other man; "Now if I were so inclined, I'd have you on all fours already..."

Groves found this prospect both frightening and exciting all at once. He moved coyly from the older man's grasp, giggling stupidly, cheeks pink from equal parts embarrassment and drunkenness. "That's positively filthy," he chuckled. "But you'd never do it. I could leave this cabin right now and you'd be unable to catch me."

Barbossa's sea-blue eyes glinted in the candle light. "Is that a fact?"

"Well, with your handicap, sir..." He barely had time to finish the statement before the old pirate had closed the distance between with three quick strides, barely aided by his crutch. Theodore's dark eyes widened at his quickness and he backed towards the door. "I'll give ye a head start!"

He yelped and darted out the door, Barbossa in hot pursuit. Outside the deck was dark, only sparsely light by starlight and the occasional lantern. The quarterdeck itself was abandoned, and the helmsman was below, acting mechanically as he sang to himself. Theodore darted along the spray slick floorboards of the deck, amazed at how quickly the one legged man was keeping pace behind him, cackling as he did.

"Sir! Sir, this is most improper!" he called back, laughing himself. The disturbance caused the helmsman to look back at them briefly, shrug and continue on with his sea-shanty.

"Lighten up, Theodore! You'll have to, if ye want to out run me!" Groves yelped in response, swaying uneasily upon his feet and was forced to grab a rat line to keep himself from being flung overboard. "This deck is most disagreeable! It sways in your favor!"

"The Calypso is in a kind mood this evening!" Barbossa laughed before making a veritable leap at the young man and dragging him down onto the deck, both laughing helplessly. When they gathered their composure, Theodore wrapped his arms around the older man's middle, pressing himself up into him and sighing happily, eager for what he hoped would happen next. "I'm all yours, sir. Do what you will with me." he purred.

But the Admiral didn't smile back. He was staring down at the drunken man splayed beneath him, knowing damn well he could have him right then and there. But it didn't feel right. Groves was too drunk to really know what he was doing or saying. This shouldn't have mattered to him, perhaps, but just then it did. He sat up with some difficultly, but found he could not get to his feet.

"Admiral?"

"Take me back to my cabin," he muttered quietly. Groves looked deeply confused but did as he was bid, putting an arm under him and helping him limp back to his quarters. In reality they seemed to be supporting each other, for neither could stand properly. "Did I do something wrong?"

Groves sat him on the edge of his bed, and Hector pulled him down beside him, kissing him again. "I could have you if I wanted, Theodore. And believe me, I have a mind to. But now not be the proper time."

"But, sir!"

"Quit calling me that!" Barbossa barked. "It's Hector. My name is Hector."

The tan skinned man blinked at this familiarity between them, leaned heavily to the right and fell face first into the bed. "Hector...I feel a little sick."

Barbossa sighed, pushed as much of the man into the bed as he could and settled beside him with

the man's face nuzzled into his chest. "Get some sleep, you'll feel better."

"Here? In your bed?"

"Lest you'd prefer the floor?"

"No," He wrapped his arms around the older, stronger man again and sighed comfortably, actually feeling content for the first time in ages, though his mind still lingered on what could be happening between the two. He looked up into Barbossa's face, noticing the hazy look in his eyes as sleep edged closer. Without thinking he reached up, tracing his finger along the fading white scar on his cheek. When he didn't protest, Groves crawled up a bit higher so that he could capture his lips again, more softly this time. "You're worried you'd be forcing yourself on me; that I'd regret being here in the morning?"

"You'd be a fool not to."

"Then I'm a fool." He kissed him again, and Hector gave up fighting it. Groves was young and excitable, not to mention he must have considerable stamina. Hector couldn't match it then, but he didn't want the man to go wanting. So he reached his hand between the two, fingers sliding easily into the other man's clean white breeches and slid his palm along the length of him. Theodore gasped harshly into his mouth, pushing himself closer. "Relax," Barbossa kept his mouth and tongue occupied in deep passionate kissing, occasionally breaking for air and to hear the other man moan and whimper as his hand worked hurriedly between the other man's shaking thighs.

Again, between the haze of his sedation, Barbossa's mind slipped a little, and Groves and Jack seemed to merge into one being, as he mumbled each name in turn. His lover either didn't hear, or didn't care at the moment, too lost in the growing heated sensation of a twisting knot in the pit of his stomach as he teetered on the edge of orgasm for what felt like ten minutes.

Gritting his teeth and pressing his face into the taut column of Hector's throat, smelling the salt of the sea water and sweat on his skin, Theodore finally reached the peek and cried out harshly against the other man's skin. Hector held him until the last of the tremors had passed, cleaned his hand and laid their contentedly next to the panting officer. "Sir, that was–!"

"Shh..." Hector muttered, draping an arm around him. "I'm tired." He was, more than he could express. The next minute he was deeply asleep, Theodore still nestled tightly against him. Groves watched him for a time, memorizing his face and eventually fell asleep too in the dark to sound of the waves crashing against the haul outside.

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Chapter 5

Sparrow slipped between bouts of complete blackness and nightmares of bones and skeletal like puppets dancing on invisible strings in the dark to the maddening beat of tribal drums. He woke abruptly and felt every muscle in his being tense like a spring, for he had no recollection of sleep, nor how he had gotten where he found himself; which was a most unusual setting.

Gone were the macabre trappings of Blackbeard's quarters; replaced by smaller surroundings, draped with rosaries, colorful bits of fabric and beads that were tacked up against the plain board walls, along with an assortment of maps and charts, not to mention an impressive array of what he guessed were stolen guns and swords.

Jack sat up slowly, peering suspiciously around the darkened room, knowing where he must be, but unsure how he had gotten there. Something in the bed next to him stirred and he froze, afraid to even breath as he glanced down. The woman was beside him in the bed, still mostly asleep, trying to snuggle into him.

Sparrow gave a yelp as if she were a snake and tumbled from the bed, crawling across the floor hurriedly as he attempted to make his escape out the door. Angelica sat up in confusion, dark hair falling all around here. Jack was at least relieved to see that she was not naked. "Jack?"

"No 'Jack' here!" he called back, fumbling with the latch and getting to his feet as he staggered into a run from the cabin. Angelica leapt from her bed, following close behind. "Jack! Where are you going, you miserable idiot?!" she called in frustration.

The pirate ignored her completely, wandering out onto the deserted deck and attempting to get his bearings. The night was almost spent, and the sky was turning faintly purple behind them as dawn approached. Seeing no zombie officers to stop him, Jack made frantically for the long boats, but Angelica was sharp on his heels. "What are you doing?"

"Leaving. Post haste!"

"You can't!"

"Can't I?" Sparrow muttered over his shoulder, climbing the rail and making to slither down the line to the dingy and untie it from there. Angelica grabbed him by his sash, yanking him backwards though he struggled to keep his place, pulling against her. "We're in the middle of the Atlantic! No land for miles! You'll die!"

"I'll take my chances." He planted the heel of his foot squarely between her breasts and kicked her backwards. She fell upon the deck with a grunt, snarled and pulled something from inside her coat. Jack's foot had no more than left the safety of the railing, then he was suddenly compelled to replace it. Then just as suddenly, he was firmly back on deck, turning around calmly and walking back to her. All this he did at first without even realizing it. But then, as he stood awkwardly close to the woman, he noticed what she held in her hands; the voodoo doll.

Sparrow reached to tear it away, but she held it aloft and kept him at bay by the end of her sword; "There's no running away this time. You owe me, Jack. The Fountain is where you will settle your debt to me." The pirate in turn frowned in frustration, seeming to bite his tongue for a moment then

began briskly; “Whatever small harm I may have caused you, dear Angelica, is pale in comparison to the humiliation and degradation I have suffered aboard this vessel! And, may I add, at your own dainty little fingers.” He gave her a harsh look as he made another frantic swipe for the doll, but still she kept him from it.

“But I have something that you want.” she grinned coyly. Jack gave a mocking chortle and shook his head; “Do you now? A lot of things have changed since I last saw you, dearest.” he explained, “I’ve acquired different tastes, as it were.”

She seemed baffled by what he was suggesting at first, then blushed and grabbed him by the front of his waistcoat, physically dragging him back towards Blackbeard’s cabin. “He’s in the chart room. Hurry, while he’s preoccupied!”

Jack strongly resisted the idea of entering that evil place again, but found himself helpless to follow. Inside the room was dark and empty, for the captain was elsewhere. Angelica lead him to a far corner of the expansive cabin, to a chained cabinet. While Sparrow watched, she hurriedly undid the lock with the stolen key hidden in her corset and threw the doors wide.

Sparrow stared at the contents inside. Bottles, perhaps two dozen or more, all carefully lined the shelves. Inside each was a ship...a real ship that had once roamed the ocean. By some unfathomable witchcraft, Blackbeard had shrunk them all and preserved them in their state of capture with in the glass, sailing on an unending tide that would never lead them anywhere. Jack stared, bug-eyed in the dark at them all, and then spotted the one his heart knew he would find; The Black Pearl.

With the greatest care he removed the bottle from the shelf, staring inside at his beloved vessel and her grand black sails as she sailed through some dark stormy waters which heaved her up and down along the unending waves. Peering closer, he could see movement aboard the deck; his crew! Or perhaps it would better be described as Barbossa’s crew, for he had captained them last.

This sent Jack’s already addled mind bending and twisting. Hector had said that the Pearl had been lost in battle. He did not know that said battle was with Blackbeard, nor if Hector actually knew what had truly become of the Pearl. There were so many questions, and far too few answers.

“He collects them; his conquests. He’s building a fleet, for when the time is right.”

“After he’s cheated death and gained immortality, I presume?”

Angelica nodded. Sparrow gingerly returned the bottle to it’s place upon the shelf, giving one last mournful look at it and turning on the woman again curiously as he closed the doors; “And what’s in it for you?”

She smiled sadly at him in the dark. “He loves me, Jack.”

“That is not love! He believes you are his daughter–even though you most certainly are not–and yet he still...ugh!” He shivered visibly, remembering the last thing he had seen being the two pirates sharing a kiss.

“I have never known a father. It is time I had one.” He fixed her with another scrutinizing glance, squinting his dark-lined eyes at her in the dark. “Oh is that so? Then why were you so eager to be part of his little fun, eh?” He lifted the gold cross from around her neck and twirled it between his fingers; “Isn’t there some law against a ‘father’ and ‘daughter’ involved in such perverse and

unnatural activities?"

She pulled away from him harshly; "You will not turn me against him! He has cared for me, looked after me, kept every promise that you never did!" She drew her sword and brandished it at him as he made to reach for the doll again, holing him at a safe distance. Sparrow gave a deep sigh of frustration, trying to keep his composure as he knew any moment Blackbeard could return. He circled her carefully, knowing she would expect him to lunge for the doll. He was trying to occupy her senses, keep her carefully off balance. Just long enough to tear that wicked toy from her grasp. "Let's talk about this like two reasonable pirates. We are that, are we not?"

"Depends."

"Your 'father' seeks the fountain. As do you. I do not. All I want, is to be on my merry way, with my precious Pearl and that evil little trinket in hand. And you and 'daddy dearest' can be off to your frighteningly dysfunctional happily ever after. So why don't I just chart you a course, lay it all out for you, and you drop me off on shore with the Pearl and we'll call it square, eh?"

Angelica gave the doll a sharp squeeze and Jack felt his lungs constrict painfully so that he wheezed and clutched at his chest for several seconds before she realized that she was harming him. Her grip loosened and Sparrow sunk upon a clothing chest, feeling surely as though his ribs were cracked. "Be careful with that thing, will you?" he coughed.

She looked at it pensively, still overwhelmed at how much power such a simple thing like a straw doll could have. "It's not that simple," she answered slowly. "Showing us the way is not enough, Jack. A ritual must be preformed once at The Fountain. It requires two chalices of silver, said to have been lost upon Ponce de Leon's ship. And that is not the hardest part;" she explained. "The ritual also requires a tear from a mermaid."

The pirate gave her a clever look; "Do I look as if I have gills, luv?"

She tapped the blade of her sword beneath his chin again, allowing the point to rest at his Adam's apple. "I heard once, that you won the favor of the mermaids."

Jack smiled in spite of himself; "Is that old story still out there?" he chuckled to no one but himself. Angelica ignored his reminiscing and stepped a bit closer, tipping her sword so that Jack was forced to look up at her as she stood before him. "And there is one more thing required..." she spoke ominously. "A sacrifice."

Sparrow licked his dry lips and carefully pushed the blade away from his throat, standing again though he hadn't quite recovered his breath. "What sort of sacrifice?"

"The Fountain does not create life and longevity from nothing. It must come from an existing source. That is why two chalices are needed. One cup brings life, the other...death."

"You don't hate me that much, do you?"

"I need years, Jack. Years you stole from me."

Sparrow surprised her then by grabbing her wrist and twisting it, causing her to drop the sword and yanking her harshly around so that she was flung against the wall of the cabin, causing bones to rattle and shake in the dark, and spoke harshly; "You've strayed, darling, into darker waters than even I could ever hope to pull you back from. Teach's crimes are many, but you are the worse offender here because you plainly won't see what in front of your bloody nose!"

“Does it goad you to be out done at your own game?” she asked sharply, before giving the doll another painful squeeze. This forced Jack to his knees, gasping for air. While he was recovering she stepped over him, looking down at him with a superior, yet somehow nervous air. Her fingers flicked away the tiny bit of cloth sown around the doll as a shirt and vest, revealing a drawn heart upon the cloth. Sparrow was still gasping for breathe, watching her with wild, frightened eyes as she daintily reached for a needle, which preoccupied a jar of odd looking liquid upon the captain’s table. “You will keep your promise to me, Jack. Even if I must force you to.”

She pricked the heart of the doll with the pin, and Sparrow gave a small yelp, not so much of pain but of surprise. That same strange fog entered his mind again, and he felt like he was in a dream once more. Angelica watched, holding her breath, as the light went out of Sparrow’s eyes and he became as compliant and empty as any one of Blackbeard’s officers.

She looked nervously at the doll again and the pin still protruding from it’s cloth skin. Unlike her captain, Angelica was not schooled in the dark arts, and so she could not manipulate them in the way her had. Part of her still disdained their use, for she had been raised in a house of God and knew that such black magic was a sure entryway into the deepest realms of Hell. But she had turned a blind eye to this truth, because she could no longer see another way. Though still young and beautiful, inwardly she had grown old and bitter for the loss of the life she had dreamt of with a man she thought she could trust.

“Jack?” she asked then, her voice trembling a little. “Are you still with me?” she touched his cheek and he looked at her, but didn’t see her. She leaned up and kissed him, relishing the feel of him again. But the thrill quickly faded. There was no feeling behind it, no fire, no passion, and certainly no love. She looked despairingly at the doll again. She could not manipulate Sparrow this way, not to her satisfaction. She wanted him to feel pain, regret, remorse, and the doll had robbed him any feeling at all. Snarling in frustration, Angelica removed the poisoned dipped pin and flung it across the room. Within moments, Jack’s vision cleared and he looked around in confusion again.

“Daughter?”

Angelica whirled, hiding the doll behind her back and stuffing it into the back of her belt beneath her coat as Blackbeard stepped curiously into his quarters, puffing on his pipe as he looked from one pirate to the next. “Father!”

The aging pirate’s eyes flickered from her guilty features to Sparrow, who looked groggy and dazed. “She did it,” he mumbled hurriedly, pointing to her accusingly. “I told you she was a bad egg, Captain. Fruit of your biological tree...that rotted.” Jack didn’t really know what he was saying or why, all he knew was that he was angry.

“Mr. Sparrow,”

“Captain!”

“Captain,” Blackbeard corrected in calm, somewhat tired tones as he stepped past Angelica and came to look Sparrow in the eye; “You look unwell. Why don’t you have a rest below deck?”

“I’d appreciate that, sir.”

“Right after you give me a heading.”

“Certainly!”

Without warning Blackbeard reached his arm around Angelica's thin waist and plucked free the hidden doll. Both made faces of concern at his discovery, but Teach kept his eyes firmly upon Sparrow. "A real heading." He muttered something quickly over the object and Jack shouted, holding his head as if it were splitting apart. Angelica watched the struggle, trying to understand this strange method of control her father was exerting over the other man. Oh if only she could master it! She noticed then, that unlike earlier in the cabin, this struggle to control the other man's mind was causing physical strain upon Blackbeard as well; "Stop resisting me! You can not hide in there, I see everything...!"

And for a moment, a strange image burst brightly upon his own mind's eye; a man that Jack knew as 'Hector'. This man held a powerful place in the pirate's heart and mind, seeming to be held in great regard. Like a lover would be. Gritting his teeth, Blackbeard over came the momentarily mental lapse and was finally able to grasp what he wanted. An image of the Mao Kun Map in all it's mysterious intricate spinning circles.

Jack groaned, but finally seemed to give up. Blackbeard released him from his hold, panting a little at the exertion and rubbing his own head. He bellowed for the Quartermaster, who appeared promptly among them, milky eyes seeming to glow in the dark of the cabin. "Take him below deck and see that he doesn't try anything clever."

The zombie grabbed Sparrow's swaying figure and forced him out the door, leaving Blackbeard and Angelica alone in the cabin. The fearsome pirate turned slowly upon the girl, who looked at him apologetically. "Father, I did not mean to..."

He put a hand to her cheek and pushed back her hair. "It doesn't matter what you're intentions were, my dear. But know that I will not tolerate any interruptions to my plans." She nodded silently and he kissed her cheek warmly, pulling her close. "You will have your chance at Sparrow before the end, I promise."

***

Below deck, the crew was attempting a few short hours of rest when they heard the ominous thunk of the Quartermaster's heavy footsteps, followed by the thud of a body hitting the ground. Shandy, the cabin boy, looked up hurriedly from his hammock to see who it was. He recognized the captain easily and grinned, leaping from his sleeping place–and as a result kicking Scrum in the face–and landed lightly beside the fallen pirate. "Captain Sparrow! You're not dead!"

"Am I not?" Jack groaned, trying to push himself up. There was a flurry of movement at his other side as the young missionary came to kneel beside him; "Are you harmed, Captain Sparrow?"

"Not as much as you might think. Though I've a splitting headache." he mumbled, allowing himself to be helped into a corner and eased upon a soft pile of rice sacks. Philip noticed the blood stains on Jack's clothing and his worn and beaten appearance, not to mention the still glaring teeth marks affixed to his throat. "That devil...!" the young man muttered. Shandy peered worriedly at the angry red slashes in the shape of a trident upon Jack's chest. "He used his dark magic on you, didn't he, sir?"

Jack did his best to make himself comfortable and nodded; “Seems there’s nothing for it, lads. We’ll have to see this journey through, or at least until I can find some way to counter his unfair advantage.”

“Many men have died trying. They’re now the unholy things you find walking about on deck, when they should be in a grave.” Philip answered, soaking a rag in a bit of clean water and using it to clean away the blood from Sparrow’s wounds. Sparrow put a hand over his and looked at him seriously, “And how did you survive?”

Philip continued his work, not meeting Jack’s eyes. “The First Mate spared me. She told Blackbeard that if he were to murder me, a messenger of the Lord, it would condemn his soul to Hell for certain.” He frowned. “But I think it is already so, regardless.”

“I’m inclined to agree.” Jack muttered. In the lantern light, Jack let his gaze slide out of focus, trying to fill the odd gaps he felt in his memory and make sense of this whole mad venture. He felt then that he might have been better off if he had simply endured the severe boredom of being in the custody of the British Navy. At least then, he would be with Hector.

Shanty patted his knee and rushed off to find more rum, leaving Philip to work. It was as the young man labored over him that Jack noticed something around his neck glinting in the light. At first he thought it was crucifix, much like Angelica’s. But this was something else; something familiar. It was a pendant, gold with four points contained in the coils of a serpent, surrounding a circle in which was embedded a ruby. Barbossa’s pendant.

Sparrow was suddenly awake, and reached for the necklace, grabbing it in his palm and staring at it, heedless that he was pulling Philip along with it. “Where did you get this?” he gasped. The blonde haired man eyed it in Jack’s grasp, memory flooding back to him. “Do you know it?”

“Yes! It’s Hector’s...”

“So that was his name.” the young man nodded with a slight smile. “He is a friend of yours?”

Jack did not answer, but his face gave it away. Whom ever this stranger was, he was dear to the man. “I have been captive aboard this ship for many months, Captain Sparrow, and I have seen many atrocities preformed. All I have been helpless to intervene. Except this one.” He ran his fingers fondly over the pendant, smiling a bit sadly; “During a raid, in which Blackbeard performed one of his profane spells upon another ship we encountered, I managed to spot a survivor in the water, clinging to a barrel. While the officers were all occupied, I climbed down into one of the long boats and brought him aboard. The man was badly injured, his right leg was missing and he was bleeding terribly. So I brought him below deck and hid him, and did the best I could to care for him.

“I wasn’t sure he would last the night, but by the grace of the Lord, he lived. I hid him in the rum cellar for four days and nights. On the fourth, we spotted a Naval vessel off the port bow, and for some reason Blackbeard had no wish to attack it. The man--you called him ‘Hector’?-- thanked me for my kindness, gave me this as a reward, and stole a long boat. I assume he was seeking refuge among the British.”

Jack absorbed the boy’s tale slowly, turning Hector’s necklace over in his palm. He felt new purpose, knowing now that he had Blackbeard to blame not only for Angelica’s descent into darkness, but for the torment his beloved Hector had endured. He understood now, there could be turning back, no escape. He had to see this venture through and find some way to thwart the evil

pirate, before it was too late for all of them.

Philip removed the chain from about his neck, “Here. It is rightfully yours.”

Jack looked at him gratefully, leaned forward and put his arms around the boy’s shoulders, drawing him into an awkward embrace. “I thank you for his life.”

Blushing a bit, Philip leaned back. “Then he is still alive?” he grinned brightly. “Thank heaven! The Lord is merciful.” he clasped his hands gratefully in thankful prayer. Jack smirked; “Merciful, yes, I suppose. Not to mention with a very strange sense of humor.”

“How do you mean?”

“That old goat you rescued is one notorious pirate lord Hector Barbossa; who has given up his pirating ways as it were and taken command of the British Royal Navy. Blackbeard doesn’t know it, but somewhere on this ocean, Barbossa is following our very same course, seeking the same prize.”

“The Fountain?” It was Shandy who spoke this time, for he had been listening intently all while he’d been fetching Jack his drink. And he was not the only one; both Scrum and Salaman had been listening with interest for some time. The portly musician spoke up then; “You mean the bloody Royal Navy is somewhere out there, right now, hot on our heels as it were?”

“Decidedly so.” Jack muttered at him. Scrum and the other eavesdropping pirates blanched, knowing the fate of any pirate who came too close to the royal navy. Either join them, or hang. It was ironic somehow, how similar the code of ethics was.

“Then we’re doomed, no matter which way we turn.” Salaman muttered darkly. Jack, still toying with Barbossa’s pendant, thought carefully. “Doomed, but not without hope.” he replied cryptically. Philip beamed at him, his confidence in Jack growing more and more. He seemed a good man, in spite of his controversial life style.

“But the mutiny failed!” Shandy replied. “We thought you were lost for sure, or would turn up zombified after that last row with the Captain.” The boy did look deeply troubled at the prospect and huddled a bit closer to Sparrow. “I would not want to end up like that, Captain, surely I would not.”

Jack patted his head fondly and drew him under his arm. “Never you fear, Shandy my lad. There’ll be no further bewitching tonight. For now we keep our heads down and wait for shore. There the real danger will make itself known.”

“And what’s that?” Scrum asked sarcastically.

“Whitecap Bay.”

This caused a hush to fall over the other men, and even more huddled closer to listen now. “Mermaids, gents. Their breeding grounds in mid summer. It’s a deadly place, but a clever sailor knows how to avoid the dangers.”

Philip looked unconvinced. “Mermaids? They’re just a myth.”

The pirate captain looked at him seriously in the dark and Philip felt his soul shiver a little. “Aren’t they?”

Sparrow tipped his hat graciously to the man, and settled back comfortably on the old sacks; “There are dangers untold that lie before us, mates. But never fear...just listen to old Jack, and he’ll see you through.”

That was, of course, as long as he could keep his wits about him and his mind free from the influence of Blackbeard and his First Mate. He slipped Hector’s necklace over his head, letting it rest over his heart and finally fell asleep.

***

Dawn came and went without event. The crew was bustling about the deck of the Providence, going about their tasks in their usual orderly fashion, yesterday’s ominous news fading to the back of their subconscious. For now there was nothing but fair skies and calm seas.

Still, something felt amiss. Gillette stalked up and down the deck, finally coming to stand upon the forecastle deck, where he found Gibbs standing at the starboard rail, glaring out into the water. “Mister Gibbs,” he began briskly, “Have you seen Lt. Groves this morning? I’ve been up and down the deck and can find no trace of him. I was informed that he stood watch last night?”

“Aye, but the helmsman said he was relieved late into the night. Not seen him myself,” Gibbs replied thoughtfully, looking troubled as he scratched his thick muttonchops, his skin glowing darkly tan after so much sun exposure in the last few days. “Now that I come to think of it, I’ve not seen the Admiral all morning either.”

“Nor have I.” Gillette realized. “You don’t suppose anything’s the matter, do you?”

Gibbs glanced nervously back towards Barbossa’s cabin, having a hunch where their two missing men might be.

Groves woke first, used to rising early. This morning however, he found that task more difficult than expected. His head throbbed, his face had an odd sensation as though he had laid out in the sun for too long, or perhaps had fallen upon it in the night. Either way, it stung. He winced away from the glaring light streaming in from the large windows at the rear of the cabin, nuzzling his face into a warm breathing surface that he came to realize was Barbossa’s back.

At the realization that he was sharing a bed, the young Lieutenant was up with a start, scrambling out of it and finding himself a mess, his clothes hanging off him, half undone. Barbossa stirred tiredly, lifting his head from the pillow and blinking at the frantic young man in front of him. “What are you doing?” he muttered.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God...!” was all Groves could answer with, searching the room for his discarded affects and wigs. “What am I doing here?! I can’t be found here, like this, in your bed, with you!”

“And why not?”

Groves stammered at him; “Because!”

Hector chuckled lightly, extending a hand and pulling the younger man back towards the bed. “Quiet now, you’ll work yourself into a fit. Lie down, collect yourself.” His partner nodded, sinking back into the soft mattress with the other man and letting himself be wrapped up in his arms again. “So, I was right about you regretting this in the morning.” he added.

Theodore looked up at him sharply. “No, sir! I mean...that is...”

He was so adorably conflicted that Hector couldn’t help but chuckle and drew him into a warm kiss, which seemed to have an instant calming affect upon the other man. “Do you remember anything from last night?”

Groves’ prominent brow furrowed for a moment, trying to collect his thoughts. “Yes...but it’s all gone a bit foggy. How can you drink that swill and manage to function?”

“Years of practice.” he grinned. He rolled the other man beneath him and began to kiss him again, feeling that old, creeping and persistent urge so often felt in the morning. “You be owing me a return favor for last night, boy.”

Beneath him Groves blushed deeply and grabbed the blankets. “Sir! Please!”

“Oh don’t be playing scared now! That won’t save ye!” Hector laughed and Groves screeched loudly, as much out of surprise and nervousness as delight.

But the sound brought another after it; and suddenly the door was flung wide as two of their shipmates made to break it down in their haste to enter.

“Barbossa!”

“Groves!”

Gillette and Gibbs shouted at once, eyes huge as they came to focus upon the scene. Hector sat up abruptly, leering at the two of them as Groves gawked and tried to shrink further into the bed. “Oh my GOD!” the other officer screeched, on the edge of drawing his sword. “Get your hands off him, you dirty–!”

“Gillette, no!” Theodore yelped, suddenly scrambling from the bed and waving for his comrade to stand down before he acted too hastily. “It’s not what it looks like!”

Gibbs groaned and shook his head, gritting his teeth in frustration. “Perhaps, but it be not far from it!” he muttered, glaring from the officers to the Admiral, who was reaching for his crutch and lifting himself from the bed. “If you’re all quite finished, I’ll have the lot of ye out of my quarters, or I’ll have you swabbing every inch of this deck with your tongues, is’that clear?”

Gillette turned and stormed off, completely furious with the situation, and Gibbs followed behind, glowering back at the two of them as he shut the door. In the wake of the intrusion, Groves put his head in his hands and sunk into a chair, whimpering; “Oh God, what have I done?”

The deep note of remorse made Hector suddenly feel foolish for ever allowing things to go this far. He put a hand upon Grove’s slumped shoulder, but the officer shrugged him off. The aging former captain said nothing, striding passed him towards his wardrobe and began to pull on fresh clothing in silence. As he dressed himself, Groves glanced up between his fingers. As the Admiral pulled

the shirt from his back, tossing it to the floor, he saw for the first time his bare skin, and how it was decorated with old scars that crisscrossed the length of his back. Lash marks.

He opened his mouth to speak, but could not find the words to ask what he wanted. “You may take your leave whenever you wish,” he reminded the man quietly. “And if it be to your preference, we’ll not speak of the incident again.”

He realized then that he had offended the man, and quickly forgot his humiliation, rising to stand behind him and help shrug him into his shirt. “It is not you, sir, that I regret. It’s that look upon my friend’s face just now.” he amended. Barbossa softened, but only a little. For all his harshness and perceived unfeeling demeanor, he was actually a sensitive and wary man, who had been burned badly enough on more than a few occasions to make him think twice about opening himself to anyone. He didn’t readily turn to his young, prospective lover, but spoke instead; “You’ll come to learn that in life we must make some hard choices, Theodore. This may be one of them. I would not think badly of you if that choice did not fall in my favor.” He gathered his hat and coat and limped out the door, leaving Groves standing alone inside the cabin, faced with a painful uncertainty.

As Hector ascended the steps to the quarterdeck, Gibbs caught up to him; “Permission to speak freely, Admiral!”

“Permission denied.”

The old sailor grabbed his arm and turned him, almost knocking him off his feet; “You’ll be listening to it anyway!” he warned. “What’s in your head?! Here you are, toying with a boy who barely knows his head from a hole in the sand, all while Jack is captured somewhere aboard Blackbeard’s ship! Have you no scruples at all, Barbossa? Not even one?”

“I am doing all that I can for Jack, Mr. Gibbs! It not be in my power to make the waves bare us any faster, or the wind carry us any further! I be mortal, just as you! No God of Sea or Sky!”

“ ‘All that you can’, eh?” Sparrow’s first mate scoffed bitterly. “And what will you be telling Sparrow about this little tryst, eh? Or are you going to lie to him, because I certainly don’t intend to.” Hector didn’t know what to say on the matter and made to move past the old sailor, but Gibbs bared him at every turn. Finally in frustration Barbossa pulled his pistol and shoved the barrel against the other man’s broad chest. “Will ye be movin’? Or do I have to remove you?”

He didn’t seemed phased by the threat, knowing Barbossa needed him too much to actually make good on it. “Does not Jack deserve your loyalty? After all that you’ve put him through?”

Again, Hector didn’t have an answer, but he looked defeated as he watched Groves excuse himself from his cabin without so much as a glance backwards. Gibbs put an arm on his shoulder; “Just let the boy be. It’s what’s best.”

For the rest of that day, in fact, the rest of that week, neither man spoke much to the other. And for as lonely and difficult as that was, it was only compounded by the alienation Groves now faced from his peers. Everywhere he went about the ship he would hear other sailors whispering about it in huddled groups, or laughing and mocking him openly. It was only his rank that kept them in

line, and he was always certain that as soon as he turned the corner the conversation returned to it's previous topic.

Of all of the crew however, Gillette was the most cruel. Where as the two men, who had risen through the ranks together and seen much terrible combat and unsavory dealings with pirates and worse, had always been close companions, the other officer now regarded him with a coldness and bitterness that Groves could not understand.

Finally, one fog bound afternoon, as he was making his rounds, he nodded to the other officer; "Will this damned fog never end?"

"What do you care?"

The darker skinned man looked in surprise as Gillette gazed back at him, his face sour and his eyes glaring him down; "So long as we're fog bound you've got plenty of time to be off absconding with the Admiral in your lurid affair."

Groves clenched his fist, feeling them tremble a little. "Guilliam," he spoke tightly, using the man's first name, "I've had quite enough of this. You've never even given me a chance to explain the situation!"

"You needn't explain it, Theodore! I've seen it all before. From the likes of James Norrington." He turned to leave, but Groves grabbed his arm. "I am NOT like the Commodore! This is an entirely different matter! How can you be so closed minded?"

Gillette leaned closer to the taller man, looking him hard in the eye as he gripped the rail of the stairs and made to take his leave; "Consorting with pirates will lead you to nothing but a bad end. I thought you understood that! Is a quick dirty fuck in the back of the ship worth hanging by your neck, Groves?!"

Theodore's dark eyes widened and to his own surprise he raised his hand and struck Gillette hard across the face, sending him sliding down upon the stairs. "I will not tolerate that kind of talk from you, nor from anyone!"

The downed officer rubbed his bruised cheek, agog at the fact that he had just been struck by a fellow officer, much less his friend. "Look what he's doing to you! You would never behave this way, not if we had a proper commander!"

"Admiral Barbossa is a fine a man, and as fine a captain as any I have had the honor of serving, perhaps more!" Groves defended, and this seemed to catch the ears of the man above, for he suddenly appeared at the rail looking down at them, Gibbs at his side.

"Looks as if troubles a'brewin', sir."

Hector stood silently, squinting down at Groves, almost hopeful that he had hadn't been wrong about the man. The officer looked up at him from below and then back to Gillette and sheathed his sword, knowing it best to walk away from the situation before it could escalate. But his comrade was not ready to back down; "Yes, there you go! Musn't keep the 'Admiral' waiting! Filthy pirate whore!"

Groves froze, eyes wide and every muscle coiled tensely. "What did you say?" he whispered. All work around them had stopped as other men paused to watch the impending fight. Gillette and Groves glared harshly at each other.

“Filthy. Pirate. Whore!” Gillette repeated.

With a shout Groves turned and fell upon him, fists flying as a cheer and a shout went up from the crowd below. “Oy!” Gibbs shouted, making his way hurried down deck, Barbossa fast on his heels.

Groves and Gillette had come to blows, knocking each other about with powerful blows from their fist and legs. Theodore’s wig had been lost in the battle, and his jacket was torn and ragged, one sleeve dangling by a thread. Gillette had already sustained what would become a black eye and a set of bloodied knuckles.

“Belay that! Stand down!” Barbossa bellowed, a path clearing through the men as he approached. He managed to grab hold of Grove’s arm as he made to strike Gillette again and yank him back, as the young man halted at once in his assault, staring at him.

Gillette, however, was still in rage and charged forward, meaning strike at both of them, this time with his sword. Barbossa drew his own weapon deftly, disarmed the charging officer easily and brought him to a halt by holding the end of his blade harshly against the side of his throat. “That’s enough!”

The young officer seemed to come to himself and surrendered immediately, “Admiral, forgive me. I didn’t realize my actions.”

“You knew them well enough,” he spat. “And you’ll be spending the night in the brig for it, atop a sound lashing!” The defeated man stared worriedly at the ground, not daring to meet Hector’s fierce eyes. “Take him away!”

As Gillette was escorted below deck, Hector sheathed his sword looked to Groves, who was staring at him with a mixture of excitement, adoration and fear. “Sir, I apologize for my actions,” but the Admiral held up his hand, demanding his silence. “I know the reasons for this row, Lt. Groves, and while I find your actions justified, I can not abide fighting aboard this vessel. I’m afraid you’ll be spending the night in the brig as well.”

Groves nodded his head submissively. “I understand, sir.”

He turned as if to escort himself below deck, but Barbossa grabbed him by the collar, flung him back around and pulled him to him, kissing him hard. Theodore thought he actually felt his heart flutter at the contact and clung to other man, who he had been sure he’d lost. Gibbs rolled his eyes, his stomach turning at the display as well and shooed off the rest of the gawking crew. When they finally broke apart, Groves smiled gratefully at his commander and allowed himself to be escorted below. The old sea dog sidled up along side the Admiral as they watched him go; “So you’ve made your choice then, have you?”

“Not a matter of choices, Mr. Gibbs. I’ll see Jack safely back at my side, and keep the lad as well.” The old man balked at him, for rarely had he heard such a mad idea. “And you think the two of them will find it agreeable, sharing your affections?”

Barbossa gave him a wicked smile that made Gibbs shudder a little at the thoughts that must be swirling in his head; “Oh, given my dear Jack’s penchant for handsome young sailors of a naive nature, and young Grove’s eagerness, I think we can come to some arrangement.”

“That be more than I can stomach.” Gibbs muttered, stalking away, Hector laughing behind him.

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Below deck, the two offenders sat in opposite cells, not looking at one another. Gillette, whom had taken three lashes across his bare back, sat huddled upon himself, biting back pained whimpers. Groves was not unfeeling, and eventually broke his silence, “When they let us out, I know of a drought that will take the sting from that.”

“Thank you, but no.” Gillette muttered sharply.

“You know he had to do it, Guilliam. You attacked him, and me, with a weapon! Be thankful it was not worse.” Groves reminded him, knowing that they had served under much harsher commands that would have had him permanently imprisoned, perhaps even shot.

“I can not help but notice that you bare no lashings.” the other officer muttered. Groves gave up with a sigh and sunk back into his cell, trying to get comfortable enough to sleep. The fog remained around them, and the wind had died so that the Providence remained painfully adrift. After another long bout of silence, it was Gillette that spoke; “My words were harsh, Theodore. For that I apologize. But they were meant to bring your attention to the dangerous situation you are in.”

Groves snorted, not looking at him and continuing to feign sleep. “How is that?”

“The Admiral fancies you because you are available, and admittedly naive. You may have his favor for a time, but it will not last.”

“You’re just angry that I’m not the man you thought.” his friend replied. “Has it never occurred to you that I might be happy with him? That this is of my own choosing?”

Gillette seemed disheartened by this statement. “And what of all you’ve planned before this voyage? What about a marriage to a proper woman?”

“I’ve never had much interest in women, Guilliam. I just never had the heart to tell you.”

“Well you might have. It would have been the decent thing to do.”

“I never meant to deceive you.”

They fell silent again, until eventually the smaller man turned towards the bars, removing his own tattered wig and revealing a head of sweaty, tightly cropped blonde hair. “Have you given no thought to Jack Sparrow?”

“What? What has he do with this?”

“It’s a well known fact that before he came over to our side, Captain Barbossa and Jack Sparrow were heavily involved. Some have said their relationship is often violent, but it’s a relationship none the less. What do you think will happen if he should show up again? Why do you think Barbossa wanted him kept in his bedchamber rather than properly secured in a holding cell as he should have been?”

Groves realized then that he truly hadn't given any real thought to that situation. Would not Barbossa be more inclined to a man of his own breeding and dubious past than to an upstart like himself? But that kiss...he didn't want to believe it was just a passing fancy. "You're wrong about him. He's a changed man, a better man."

Gillette gave him a remorseful look. "Oh Theodore...don't be naive. It's best you end it now, before it goes to far. Think of your reputation, your position! Are those things not important as well?"

"Of course."

"Then do what you know is right."

Theodore struggled for a reply when suddenly there was a sound like thunder above them, and an alarm went up as the ship suddenly rocked hard to the right, unseating both of them. "THE SPANISH!" someone cried from above.

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Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

*Blackbeard continues to put Jack in non-con situations, proceed with caution

Both men gripped the bars, staring anxiously towards the upper deck. The pounding of feet above them nearly drowned out all other sounds, punctuated by the shouts of men, particularly the Admiral, as they called commands to each other.

“We’re being attacked,” Groves muttered. “They must have snuck up on us in the fog. Damn them!” he jolted the bars roughly. “We need to get up there!”

“How?” Gillette muttered in irritation across from him. “We’re trapped.”

Theodore shook his cell door again and heard an odd creaking sound that drew his attention to one of the hinges, noting that it had come somewhat loose. “Well, I don’t intend to remain so.” he grinned, working hard against the door now to lift it free. Gillette stared at him, thinking silently how his former friend had adopted bad habits so quickly.

Above, Barbossa stormed the deck, glaring out into the fog as the Spanish Man-of-War vessel lingered to their starboard bow. He could barely make out the crew running along it’s decks, and the sails above it looked like a cloud among the grey mist. “HARD TO PORT! BRING HER AROUND!” Barbossa bellowed as loud as his voice would carry. They had to get out of range as quickly as possible, before another blast could take them broadside.

She had come upon them unseen and had fired without warning. Clearly they had seen their chance to permanently way-lay their competition. They had fired two canon blasts, one which had raked across the deck, killing two men, injuring several more and damaging the mizzenmast. “How could we not have seen them coming?!” Gibbs gasped next to him as they looked out across the deck at their enemy. They were far too close, canon fire from their powerful guns at this range would cripple them, if not out right sink them. The Spanish ship; named aptly as Ferdinand’s Hand, was far bigger than The Providence and was endowed with at least sixty guns and more than enough hands to tend them.

Gibbs had seen such battles involving these kind of heavily armed ships in his many years upon the sea, and rare it was that a ship survived one of their attacks. But the Providence was sleek and fast, and could easily out maneuver her. “Ready the guns and make way! All hands on deck! Take her into the fog, we’ll loose ‘em there!” The Admiral shouted as they scrambled to get the ship underway again.

Barbossa paused at the rail, pulling out his spyglass and peering across the water. He could see the flurry of movement on the opposite deck, but one figure stood out among the watery mist, clad in red, the feathers upon his hat fanning in the breeze; It was the same man Barbossa had spotted earlier as the same ship had passed them on the open water weeks ago. Seems she had been lying

in wait. But where were the other two? Probably gone on ahead to the Fountain.

The man, standing boldly upon the rail shouted across the water to them; “British dogs! You will never reach The Fountain! Surrender or die!”

Barbossa’s crew looked to him, including Gibbs, waiting with baited breath for his next command.

“The Royal British Navy does not take orders from fools, nor do we suffer them!” He bellowed back. The man in red sneered back at him; “Arrogant British dog! Do you not know who I am?”

“Nay, and nor do I care to!”

The man flustered and continued anyway; “I am Lord Adalvino Allesandro Aldano Armardio Sanchez! Emissary to his royal highness King Ferdinand of–!” The man’s grand speech was cut short by Hector firing a shot which clipped his hat and blew several of the feathers off. “Forgive me, your lord ship, but ye were runnin’a bit long winded!” he laughed.

The Spaniard bolstered, humiliated by this. “Prepare to be boarded!”

“Can we out run them?” the old sailor asked worriedly at his side, having watched the whole exchange in tense silence.

“Aye, we can.” Hector nodded, glaring into the fog as it billowed over them, the Spanish slipping further from their sight. “But I’m not ready to run just yet.”

“You can not mean to stand and fight! They’ll sink us!”

Hector gripped the rigging, grinning like a fend, that old clever spark in his eyes; “Were we to stand and fight proper, yes. But such cowardly attacks on us calls for a more... ‘unconventional’ means of retaliation.”

The salt-and-peppered haired man grinned now in understanding as well. “Tell the men to bring her around; we’ll circle them in the shroud and come at them from the starboard side. They’ll never see it before it’s too late.”

“Wicked clever ye are, sir.”

“Never forget it.”

He could barely make out the outline of the Ferdinand’s Hand in the fog, already putting the ship to their rudder. They struggled to run as silently as possible, even as the Man-of-War fired at them spasmodically, trying to strike out at them blindly. “Ready on the guns! I want at least three canons filled to bursting with nails and crushed glass! We’ll shred the pigs to ribbons and leave ‘em limping in the water!”

Barbossa caught a glimpse then of the Spanish ship’s figurehead through the veil and realized just how close they were passing to her. Were her crew not so preoccupied in just trying to turn her sheer bulk, they would have realized that the sleek sails of the Providence were passing right in front of her nose.

A tense hush fell over all of them at this, for even the slightest shout might alert the enemy to their presence and render their plan useless. Hector reached to clutch the pendant around his neck, remembered that it was missing and firmly grasped the rail instead. “Calypso, if you hear me...” he

whispered, “Remember your servant and his loyalty to you.”

As if in answer, the fog grew a little denser and the sky above a bit darker, creating an even more affective barrier between the two warring vessels. Hector raised his crutch high, “Steady men, steady now...fire on my command.” he called.

Another blind shot from the forward canon’s missed them by inches, creating a loud splash in the waves next to them and showering them with spray. Hector could feel the anxiety of his crew below, as if it were a living breathing presence next to him. They were scared, and so was he, but simply out running the Spanish was not an option; sooner or later they would catch up again, and who was to say they would be able to defend themselves any better?

Gibbs gripped the rail further down deck, looking back to the Admiral, providing a relay between him and the rest of the crew. They were behind the ship now, facing her starboard bow on broadside. They could hear the creaking of the cannon ports as they opened and the guns rolling and creaking against the wood. “Wait for it...”

A look out perched in the crows nest of the Ferdinand shouted and raised the alarm.

“FIRE! FIRE ALL!”

The resulting canon blast sent a plume of smoke, sparks and ash ripping through the humid air. Cries came up from the ship beyond, and as the Providence pitched in the resulting swell, nearly knock Barbossa from his feet, he could see that a canon ball had felled the highest half of her main sail as it came splintering down into the water. Her starboard side was riddled with fresh ragged holes, and at least four of her starboard gun ports had been blown to smithereens.

And suddenly, Theodore, freshly escaped from the brig, emerged upon deck to find it themselves in the heat of battle, smoke and ash filling the air. His eyes fell upon Barbossa, shouting commands for a final round to be fired as they readied for their escape; “Get in front of her boys! Tiller hard to starboard! We’ll put her to our rudder and begone before she collects herself!”

The crew cheered, heartened by the success of the Admiral’s strategy.

“Good lads!” he called to them proudly. “Now hit the forward gun port and–!”

Smoke erupted from the remaining cannon ports of the Ferdinand’s flank, and the roar of canon fire was only matched by the hammering crash that suddenly swept The Providence. In the chaos of the sudden hail of gun and canon fire, Theodore saw clearly the outline of Barbossa against the grey-white fog bank, and then he was gone.

“Admiral! Admiral!!” he bellowed, racing across deck, bounding over stunned sailors bent double holding injuries and coughing on the acrid smoke filling the air. He darted up the deck steps to the forecastle and found Hector lying there among the splintered remains of the railing and ruined rigging, face down upon the deck. Heart in his throat, Theodore leapt over the churned up bit of deck and fell beside him, turning him over. “No! No! Hector, please!”

Barbossa was unconscious but alive, and though blood speckled his face and hair, Groves could not find any fatal injury upon him. The men below them screamed and moaned, for the attack was not yet over. Temporarily bereft of her command, The Providence was no longer moving forward at sufficient pace, and while she drifted, the soldiers aboard the Ferdinand were running along the

deck, firing onto the ship with riffles and muskets.

Deprived of his own weaponry, Groves reached into Barbossa's belt and drew his pistol, still shielding the fallen man with his body and took aim at their enemy. He fired off three shots; tossed the empty pistol aside and reached for another. It was as he did this that he saw a figure in a stark red coat take careful aim at them. Groves' face twisted in fury and he fired again; his bullet finding it's home in the Spaniard's shoulder, causing him to shout and fall back, cursing bitterly.

"Barbossa! Barbossa!" Gibbs was shouting through the cloud of smoke as he stumbled his way towards deck. He stopped short when he saw the old pirate laid out upon the deck, Groves clutching him. "Help me!"

He hurried over, helping Groves lift the unconscious commander and carry him towards his cabin. "We've got to get out of range of those guns!"

"Take the helm, Mr. Gibbs!" Groves nodded. "I trust you can!"

"Aye!"

The Lieutenant called to the attention of a lingering bunch of bewildered sailors, who had been stunned by the blow. "You there! I have a plan!" he bellowed, pointing into the Admiral's cabin.

Gibbs had no more than reached the helm, rolling aside the dead man slumped upon it with a bullet hole in his back and shouted; "Anyone still breathing; get that mainsail sheet!" and turned the wheel hard to bring her out of the range of the gunfire, than he heard a clamor above him on the forecastle deck. He saw a handful of still able bodied sailors heaving bottles of what looked like...

He gasped and almost lost control of the wheel. "Not the rum!!" he pleaded, but his cries went unheard. The bottles, secured with soaked bits of cloth and sail, had been lit on fire and hurled towards the Spanish ship, where they exploded, sending black smoke rippling up into the air and sent men shouting and hollering as the struggled to stem the resulting fires.

It was the last distraction that The Providence needed, for now she was moving spectacularly fast along the water, and soon the Ferdinand was just a ghost at her rudder.

Hector was already struggling towards consciousness as Groves half carried, half dragged the Admiral into his quarters, spreading him out on the bed and pulling open his coat and vest while they waited the arrival of the medic, who was busy with the more seriously injured.

"Nnnh...Jack..."

Groves shushed him and tried to keep him still. His torso bore some bruising and some very shallow puncture wounds from wood splinters, but otherwise he seemed sound. The greatest damage had been caused by the fall itself, for a ominous red-purple bruise was forming across the man's forehead where he had collided with the deck. It seemed to have rattled the Admiral's brains a bit, for he was crying out strangely. "Jack...Jack...Don't leave me again!"

His eyes opened and he sat up, struggling with Groves who tried to push him back down. “Where is he? Where’s Sparrow?”

Theodore looked into his face carefully, searching it for recognition, but Hector didn’t seem to be quite all there just then. “Sir, Captain Sparrow’s not here.” Barbossa tried to absorb this information, looking around the room suspiciously as though he didn’t recognize it. “This isn’t the Pearl...”

Groves cupped his face and looked at him worriedly, “Admiral, do you know where you are?”

“ ‘Admiral’?” He groaned, rubbing the throbbing bruise on his head and blinked several times, wincing. “Aye...Admiral be correct. My apologies, Theodore. I was a bit confused.”

“I’m just grateful you’re alive!” He hugged the man close, who groaned painfully in response, then remembered himself and flushed with embarrassment. “So sorry, sir. Is there anything I can get you?”

The door opened and Gibbs’ burly head poked inside, “Admiral! Glad to see yer still in one piece...uh...more or less.” He winced a little at his thoughtless comment, but Hector seemed to pay it no mind. “How fairs our vessel, Mr. Gibbs?”

“Well, the deck looks as if it were raked across by the hand of God, the forward sail is not but rags, and we lost three canon ports. She’ll sail on, but we’ve lost time and speed for certain.”

“How many dead?”

“Fifteen, twenty five maimed or wounded.”

“And The Spaniard?”

“We’ve lost ‘im, sir. She’ll not get underway again under her own power. It’s certain that she’ll have to wait to be rescued by one of her fleet.”

Hector nodded in satisfaction, but the motion seemed to dizzy him and he sunk back into the bed with a grunt of pain. Gibbs fetched the bottle of laudanum from the drawer and administered a few drops to the man while Groves endeavored to make him comfortable. “It was a daring maneuver sir. One Jack would have been proud of.” the old man nodded, hand on his shoulder. He looked from Barbossa to Groves, seeing that he was intruding upon a private moment and quietly excused himself; “I’ll see what’s holding up the doctor.”

“His majesty would be pleased with you.” his officer said when he had gone, trying to hide the growing look of disappointment on his face. Hearing Hector call for Jack in his moment of need made him feel small, fleeting, unimportant. He swabbed Hector’s bruised brow with a damp cloth until the older man curled his fingers around his wrist and looked at him carefully; “How was it you escaped the brig?”

“Half-barrel pinned hinges, sir. Frightfully loose when not cared for overtime.” he smiled. “Or so I learned from a young blacksmith.”

Barbossa chuckled softly and closed his eyes again, head ringing. “You’re full of surprises.” He fell asleep again and Theodore remained at his side, though now his heart felt heavy with the misery of foolish love, and the fear that perhaps Gillette had been right. “So are you, sir.”

***

Dusk had fallen when The Queen Anne's Revenge reached the dark, mysterious waters of Whitecap Bay. Jack stood at the bow, near the rail, staring out at the shore beyond, and the few brief miles of dark water separating them and the safety of the beach. It was a shoreline littered with rocks and high cliffs creating a crescent shape, on which ships had been cruelly thrust for many centuries, called to their doom by the otherworldly creatures that dwelled in the fathoms below. From his vantage point, he could see the ancient pier and the remains of an old and neglected lighthouse.

Shandy came to his side, looking with wide eyes to the shore. Jack wondered vaguely how long it had been since the lad had set foot upon land, or if he even remembered where his real home was. "You could escape, you know." the young man spoke softly, so not to be heard by unintended ears. "Swim to shore. Be free!"

"There is no freedom to be earned in these tides," the dark haired captain spoke seriously, looking down at the sea foam collecting around the haul, which seemed to glow in the eerie moonlight. "To enter those waters is to forever bid your time upon land farewell."

Shandy peered down into the swell, as if trying to see for himself whatever supernatural creature of the deep might be lurking. But he could see nothing but the moonlight on the tide. "Scrum doesn't believe you," he confessed them, folding his arms and leaning tiredly upon the old wooden banister, his tri-corner hat slipping down a little further of his mass of blonde tangled hair. "He says you're putting us on, about the mermaids and all. Just to scare us."

"Scrum's an idiot." Jack said bluntly and both he and the boy grinned at each other. "He's jealous like, of you and the First Mate. Says he could impress her more." Jack made a distasteful face at the idea, "Well, you tell him he'll get no complaint from me. However, he may have another Captain to worry about." He was still reeling from the idea that Angelica could ever find herself falling for a man as wicked and black hearted as Edward Teach. He considered her quest to save his soul...but who was going to save hers?

He heard the clunking of her heels then upon deck and turned slowly to face her, Shandy remaining at his side. "We're going ashore, Jack. You'll be coming with me."

"Ah, but if I came with you that would imply that I enjoy the pleasure of your company, or that I regard you as anything more than a corse-grained cur spawned straight from the black pit itself, which I don't."

She glared hard at him, unamused by his canter, grabbed a long dread of his hair and tugged him forward. "OW! That's attached you know!"

"You too boy!" she snapped, sending Shandy into a flurry of quick jumpy movements as they made for the long boats. Sparrow, still caught in her painful grip, looked at her in concern. "Why are you bringing the whelp along? He's barely got his sea legs."

"More bodies in the water."

Jack considered this grim answer carefully, pulled free and looked at her harshly. “A child, Angelica? You would condemn him, along with the rest of these unfortunate souls?” She did not answer him, but Jack could see guilt in her eyes. “You’ve grown cold, my dear.”

“And who’s fault is that?”

“Not mine, I assure you.”

Of the two hundred man crew aboard the fearsome Queen Anne, fifty descended into the boats. Jack rode along side Angelica, Blackbeard, Shandy, Salaman, Philip Swift and Scrum, guarded by Gunner the zombie. He was still clutching his cat-of-nine-tails, should any of the crew feel less than compliant. No one spoke a word as they reached the ancient, rotting pier, but only Blackbeard, Angelica, Philip and Jack were granted leave.

Stepping out of the boat, Jack turned worriedly back to the unwitting crew. “Remember lads, keep your wits about you! Beautiful the sirens are, but just as deadly. Do NOT leave the boat.” He did his best to impress this warning upon them, especially the naive innocence of the cabin boy. Blackbeard reached back, grabbed Jack by a fistful of hair and pulled him along. “Enough chatter out of you! You’re worse than Scrum at times, always prattling on like a bloom’ jay bird.” he muttered.

“If I displease you so, sir, why not just set me adrift and be done with me? Or better yet, you could just turn me loose into that dense and deadly jungle...surely something would spare you the trouble of killing me.”

Blackbeard smirked back at him, eyes dark and cold. “Not likely.” He looked to the missionary, “Remain upon the dock and help with the nets.”

Sparrow sighed heavily, watching the boats drift out to the bay again. “Some men have all the luck...”

They climbed the crumbling, sea-spray slick stairs of the weathered rock, leading to the top of the lighthouse. None could tell how long it had been since it was last used, but the oil for the lamp light remained heavily supplied, though time had begun to rust it’s container. “Whale oil,” Salaman said appreciatively, “Burns like a gift from God.”

“Mermaids need man-made light to attract them. This will serve nicely,” Blackbeard grinned, running his fingers over the equipment. Sparrow stood at the edge of the lighthouse, looking down at the boats and the dark water. He seemed to be having an attack of conscience as it were, knowing the fate Blackbeard had designed for them. He’d seen many men die before, sometimes by his own hands, sometimes by the error of his command. He had learned not attach himself, not to feel for them. They were a crew, and it was their knowing duty to risk life and limb for their captain and his enterprise. But this was wrong. These men had no idea what they were getting into, and the ones that did were too old and too broken in body and spirit to try and change it.

Angelica noticed this, and seemed a bit perplexed. “What do you care of their fate? You are safe up here.” He didn’t answer her. He had a mind to throw her down into the water himself, hating what she had become. “Do you pray for them?”

“What?”

“Do you pray for their souls? Or are you just in the business of condemning them now?”

Before she could answer their Captain spoke again; “If all is in readiness, then the rest of you go down to the pier. Daughter, see that their courage remains. I’m counting on you.” He touched her shoulder and she beamed at him, glancing curiously back at Sparrow as she made to leave. “Will you be alright up here, alone?” she asked Blackbeard.

He laughed at the idea and shooed her on, leaving him and Sparrow alone in the tower. The black-clad pirate moved leisurely around to the front wall of the lighthouse, standing but a few way from Sparrow as they watched the tide come in and the men below struggle as the freshly lit lamp shone upon them in the dark. “There are terrible decisions we have to make as leaders of men, Jack. Like sheep, they follow blind, often to their doom, without a thought for how fragile and fleeting life is. How abruptly it can end.”

“I’m sure that’s not a concern under your command.” Sparrow muttered. Blackbeard eyed him for a moment and leaned casually upon the damp and crumbling stone wall. “You know, Jack, I wasn’t always as cruel a man as you see before you. Once, I was an honest sailor.”

“Likely story. Heard it a thousand times before.”

“Pirates are made, Jack, not born. Except perhaps in your case. I think you were born to be the man you’ve become.” He gave the other pirate a pleasant, pensive look. “You’re a worthy spawn of the feared Captain Teague.”

Jack shuddered at the familiarity with which the devil spoke his father’s title. “My father, terrible curious oddity that he is, would never waste so much as a drunken belch of breath upon the likes of you.”

Blackbeard laughed heartily at this statement, “Quick wit and a sharp tongue. That came from your mother.”

“My mother died when I was still in a cradle.”

“I know,” Blackbeard replied quietly, still staring down the younger man, moving a bit closer to him without Jack even realizing it. “I killed her.”

Sparrow froze for just a second at the statement, then scoffed; “You’re just trying to get a rise out of me.” But he wasn’t entirely certain as he looked at the dark man, who’s face had a weathered sort of serenity to it now. “Maybe I am. Maybe I’m not. I’ve killed too many people over the years to recall all their names and faces.” he admitted, seeming very serious on the matter, even tired by it. “Which is why I have few qualms about the sheep below us, or even you.”

“But you can’t kill me. Not yet.” Sparrow pointed out, “And if you try your hodou-voodoo on me again,” he added wiggling his fingers as if casting a spell, and making the other captain flinch irritably at his ridiculousness, “and you won’t, because you can’t, you still won’t get what you want. Not without me.”

The deep lines around the corners of the aging sailors mouth deepened as he frown darkly and he made to reach into his coat to collect the doll, only to find it gone. Jack smirked, knowing that Angelica had stolen it. “Ha ha!”

Blackbeard seized him by the throat and flung him against the rock, threatening to crush his neck beneath his powerful palm. Jack struggled, wide eyed and gasping, but knew he still had leverage.

“Feeling a bit impotent without our magic, are we?” he managed to choke out. The man made as if to strike him, but was suddenly distracted by movement below. Both turned their eyes to the bay waters, and say something slithering below them in the dark.

Their shapes, sleek and smooth, glittered in the yellow light from the tower in shades of green, gold, and silver, too quick to catch more than a glimpse. All the same, Jack knew them. Mermaids. They circled slowly beneath the boat below, attracted to the light and the faint tune being crooned by one of the unsuspecting pirates. First one appeared, then two. Jack saw three more slither beneath the boat then, lurking beneath it like Orcas gathering beneath a seal on an ice flow.

Still pinned to the wall by Blackbeard, he felt the older pirate’s grip around his throat loosen and move instead to his chest, feeling the quickening pace of his heart beat. “Do you feel it, Jack? The thrill of impending death? That sudden rush in your veins, the hyper sensitivity brought on by acute fear?”

Sparrow ignored him, absorbed in the sight below. The boat was utterly surrounded now, and he could see more glowing shapes further beyond, drawing near the boats then as well. There must be two dozen of them now, and more would come. They were hungry; ravenous this time of year for feeding and in need of a mate. But mermaids were much like black widows. They would use a man up and devour him without a second thought, or so much as a tear of remorse. His heart was pounding in his ears and Blackbeard was leaning heavily into him, even though his eyes were on the water as well. He was hungry for what would happen next; the impending frenzy that would allow him his chance to take one of the mythical creatures captive, bringing him that much closer to his goal.

“No!” Jack shoved the old man away from him, climbed upon the remaining wall and bellowed into the dark; “Do not follow them into the water! Whatever they say don’t listen! Stay in the boat! For God’s sake! Stay in the bloody boats!”

This sudden warning startled all below, and with a shriek of rage, one of the mermaids leapt from her watery perch, dragging with her the helpless figure of Scrum and dragged him into the bay with her as her sisters attempted to overturn the boats and collect their own prize.

The pirates screamed and bellowed, firing shots into the water as it churned with activity. On the pier the men clutching the nets in hopes to ensnare an unwitting sea ghoul found the tables had turned, for the creatures had no fear of shore.

“You’ll not interfere!” Teach bellowed, grabbing Jack around the middle and flinging him back into the tower. Sparrow went spinning and nearly went over the other side of the crumbling wall. He attempted to grab a rock and bash Blackbeard across the head with it, hoping to dash his brains out, but the aging pirate was stronger. “You think I need magic to keep the likes of you in line, Sparrow?” the heavily bearded man snarled close to his face before leaning in and sinking his teeth deep into Sparrow’s shoulder, ripping a yelp of pain out of the other man. Below, the sounds of battle could be heard as the pirates struggled for their lives against the swarming mermaids. Their screams resounded through the air, rippling off the rocks and surrounding them fully. The sounds of torment and anguish, of desperation and pain. It would have struck any other man cold, but not Blackbeard. It drove him, filled him with desire he could not explain. He would have preferred the thrill that came from bending another’s will to his, to make Jack desire him back. But at that moment, he hadn’t the luxury, so he would have be satisfied with plain old brute force.

He continued to bite the other man, leaving a wreath of bloody teeth marks about his neck and shoulders as Sparrow struggled for breathing room between them, but could get none. It was as he

was licking the blood away from one particularly brutal bite that he noticed the new chain about Sparrow's neck, and the pendant that dangled from it. His eyes widened briefly for a moment in memory, for he was sure he had seen that trinket somewhere before, and quite recently. He pulled it tightly around Jack's neck, choking him a bit. "Where did you get this?" he hissed.

Sparrow smiled in spite of his panic, "What's does it matter to you?"

Blackbeard's eyes glinted, reflecting the light of the flame behind them as the screams below pitched higher. "You're right. It doesn't." Pushing the slighter man up the wall, he fought his way beneath his clothing. Jack bellowed and cursed at being touched so roughly, but at least it was by human hands. Blackbeard continued to keep him fixed in the choke hold, grinding against him as his hand worked roughly between his legs. Sparrow struggled and cursed, but for every act of defiance the chain was pulled tighter about his throat. The lack of air and the jolting of sensitive nerves left the pirate weak and lightheaded, gasping for air.

"Don't blackout yet, Jack, I want you to feel this..." he man grunted into his ear, thrusting against him though his own breeches remained in tact. It hardly seemed to matter, Jack could still feel what the other man had to offer, pressing hotly against his thigh and hip. The chain of Hector's pendant was cutting into his skin, and everything seemed hazy as he struggled for air. He wanted to cry out for help, but knew none would come. He had to save himself.

"Kill you, I can not. Not yet." Blackbeard snarled, his breathing heavy and labored, trying to turn his face towards him again to engage in a hungry kiss; "But breaking you will be a gratifying enough accomplishment."

Jack felt himself drifting, barely aware of the jolting of his own hips, or the rough reply of Blackbeard's, when inspiration struck him. Teach did not notice the sudden alertness in Sparrow's eyes for he was suddenly groaning loudly, driving hard against Sparrow as he hit orgasm himself. Jack took the opportunity of distraction to finally break free of his grip, throw himself forward, pulling Teach sword from his scabbard. He stumbled, and Blackbeard blinked. "You intend to run me through, Sparrow! You can barely lift that sword, much less swing it!" he scoffed, but he did look a bit worried.

Jack shook his head, hair falling all around him. "I only need to do it once!" He drove the thing hard, upward, straight into the container of whale oil. At once the flames jumped higher, threatening to consume them both. Jack teetered on the edge of shattered wall that lead directly down into the frothing water below, were a swarm of angry mermaids waited.

Blackbeard gave him a wild eyed look as he stood near the stars, his wild grey and black hair fanned around him by the flames, making him look like a figure of madness; "Idiot! You mean to kill me! You'll die here as well, or fall below and be torn limb from limb!"

"I'll take my chances!" Sparrow grinned knowingly. Teach's face faltered as he realized then, stomach plummeting, what was happening, that the tales must be real. "It's true!"

Jack grinned at him, turned, spread his arms wide and let himself fall. Blackbeard made to grab him, but could not catch him. The next second the entire light house was engulfed in a blanket of fire as the whole of the oil ignited.

Sparrow was in free fall, rocks, sparks and ash falling around him. He went head first into the water, arms grabbing at him as he was swept below the surface. But they did not tear at him, or claw or bite. Jack opened his eyes beneath the waves, forgetting the sting of the salt and saw himself surrounded by the beautiful ethereal creatures as they truly were.

Below the water, the human appearance of a mermaid shifted to more natural aquatic features. Their faces flattened, eyes widened and became wide black orbs, and their luminescent skin showed the artful scalloping of scales. Their webbed hands slid easily across Jack's skin, wrapping around his torso and arms as they smiled at him. But rather than drag him down to death, they pushed him upwards, baring him with the tide to shore.

On the pier, the surviving pirates tried to cover their heads from the falling debris in the explosion and keep from having their feet swept from beneath them and pulled into the raging water with their foes. Both Philip and Angelica had seen someone fall from the lighthouse tower in the water below. "Jack!" The missionary found himself yelling. He sprinted across the slick dock, barely avoiding the groping reaching hands of the enraged creatures below. He raced to the beach, sword held ready. He had to save Sparrow, for he felt surely that the pirate was their last hope of escaping the doom that Blackbeard intended for all of them. "Captain Sparrow! Hang on! I'm coming!"

He arrived just in time to see Jack erupt from the surface, gasping loudly for breath, surrounded by mermaids. "Get away from him! Let him go you foul things!" He shouted, charging into the water, swinging his sword at the gathering water nymphs as they tried to grab at him. But as he did Jack held up a hand, waving for him to stand down. Swift realized that Jack was not being harmed by their touch, and rather that he was being borne forward by their hands to safety.

They sprawled him on the wet sand, and Sparrow, shaken from his ordeal, bowed his head to them graciously as they plucked and pulled at his clothing; "Ladies, I am ever in your debt."

"Jack, stay with us!" they called in their sweet, beautiful voices, tentatively trying to pull him back into the water with them, pressing themselves against him. The one closest to him; an alluring blonde with wide blue eyes laid herself across Sparrow's torso and handed him the pendant that had been lost in the fall. "It's been too long, Jack Sparrow."

"I know, darling, but it couldn't be helped. Pirating and all."

"Why do you help these murderers? They have harmed many of us."

"Not my intention, I assure you. Blackbeard will be dealt with." The mention of his name caused them to hiss and bare their fangs, beautiful eyes turning back to those angry dark orbs, silken hair to look like ragged bits of seaweed and tentacles. One of the darker mermaids, swum in threatening circles about him, trying to drag the pirate back into the tide; "He's with him! The one who stole the Sword of Triton from us!"

"He must pay!"

"NO!" Snarled the blonde from her protective place upon Jack's chest. "Have you forgotten the oath? This man shall not be harmed! He is ever in our protection."

This calmed the others and they seemed subdued as she turned back towards the pirate and his staring friend, "Return with us, Jack. We can take you away from these wicked men, bring you to whatever shore you wish."

Jack considered, but knew he could not abandon the quest now. Though how much more of it he could survive he was unsure. "You...you're talking to them?" Philip stammered. The women leered at him fearfully, leery of the sword in his hands. "Oh they and I go way back, mate. Mermaids live

for hundreds of years and have memories the like you wouldn't believe." he grinned tiredly. "Though they are insatiable little devils, aren't you darlings?"

The blonde seized his face and kissed him hard and held him for several minutes before Jack finally managed to free himself. "To keep you safe, till next we meet." she purred before slithering back into the water, her sisters following. Philip helped haul Jack further up the beach, as he seemed a little too unsteady to do so himself. "Philip, my lad, I am growing rather fond of you. Relived I am, truly, that you did not end up harmed in this...fiasco."He tried to shake the water out from his clothing as he sloshed along, water bubbling out from the tops of his boots.

They heard a crying then from off to the right among the shallow rocks. Jack peered over and saw to his shock and dread, that one mermaid remained. She was smaller than the others, and younger perhaps, with black hair and an angelic human face. She had been injured, her tail fin slashed and bloodied from a sword. Philip realized that the wound must have come from his own hand, and he quickly dropped the weapon as though it were burning hot.

"Quickly, we've got to get her off the rocks before someone–!" But Jack's instructions came too late. The creature was suddenly snared within a net as Scrum and the other survivors fell upon her. She screamed and thrashed, revealing claws and fangs, frightening Philip back a little. "She's injured!" Sparrow bellowed, swatting at the pirate that was brandishing a club at the helpless creature; "Not so rough!"

"WHERE IS HE?!"

Jack froze up at once at that horrific bellow that drifted over them, eyes wide before slipping behind the taller, more muscular Philip. "Save me!"

The missionary looked on in complete confusion, until he saw the trouble. Blackbeard himself, smoking, beard singed and glowing, stormed towards them, his ire terrible. Angelica ran to catch him. "Father, father, you musn't–!"

He grabbed her reaching arm, twisted her about and reached inside her belt, taking the stolen doll from it's hiding place there. "You're begging will not deter me this time." he glowered and she winced at his brutality.

"How are you not dead?!" Jack exclaimed.

"My death is preordained! Therefore, I will not meet my end at the hands of a twatelling fool son of a heathen bitch!" He raised the doll in his hand and made as if to tear it apart, and Jack along with it, when he spied the captured mermaid. Sparrow shuddered, waiting for the blow to fall, but it seemed for the moment Blackbeard had forgotten him entirely. "Get her into the coffin, now!" he ordered the men, sweeping past them and motioning for the glass coffin, which Jack had first discovered below deck, to be brought forward. Of course, it made sense now. He needed a live mermaid in order to procure a tear, and it was several days journey into the jungle before they could even think of nearing the fountain. So they would need some method of carrying item A to location B.

Regaining his voice, though his knees continued to quake, Jack grinned charmingly, stepping away from Swift and looking around at the rest of them; "Well then! Seems we all got our wish. I'm not dead, you're not dead, and we've our catch of the day! I'd say now would be a good time negotiate–!" But before he could continue his palaver, Teach turned and landed a powerful blow across his face with his fist, knocking Jack out cold.

They all stood, stunned in the aftermath as Blackbeard shook out his fist with a pleasurable sigh and put out the last burning bit of his beard and looked to Swift. “Carry him. We march now. Leave the dead behind, we’ve no time to waste digging graves!”

***

The Providence arrived at dawn the following morning to the shattered wreckage of the bay. The sky was grey and the sea churned beneath them, seeming full of fury. Barbossa stepped upon the beach, among charred stone, shattered wood from long boats and the littered corpses of drowned pirates and dead mermaids.

The landing party of The Providence stared at the dead things, hardly able to believe their eyes. Though they were corpses now and had lost their human glamour in death, they were still beautiful and sad to behold. “What happened here?” Groves asked, following slowly behind the Admiral at a daunted pace. “A fierce battle it seems,” Mr. Gibbs replied carefully, walking carefully along the battered pier behind them. “Could this be the work of the Spaniards?” Gillette asked, bringing up the rear.

Hector silently surveyed the land before them, gazing pensively at one of the mermaid corpses. “No, this was the work of pirates, you can be sure of that. Blackbeard’s been given the devil’s speed. They must be a day ahead of us.”

“Then it is a fruitless effort,” Gillette muttered. “Who knows how thick this jungle is? We’ll never catch up.”

“Sounds like a cowardly excuse to me.” Barbossa replied, glaring back at the man. “And what would you be telling his majesty then, hmm?” Gillette ignored the slight, looking to Groves, who gazed nervously back at him. The young Lieutenant found himself in an quandary just then, torn between his feelings for the brash former pirate before him, and the warnings of his long-time friend and comrade. He had spoken little to Barbossa since he’d recovered from their encounter with the Spaniard, and now seemed to be in a nervous agitation from which he could not break. This troubled the Admiral, but just now his mind was elsewhere. His eyes roved over the bodies of dead pirates, praying he would not see Jack among them. Gibbs seemed to know what was in his mind and came to stand at his shoulder, “I don’t think we’ll find him here. Jack’s too clever.”

“Aye, but you don’t know Blackbeard like I do, Mr. Gibbs.” Barbossa answered darkly. “If he’s wicked enough to invite the ire of sea creatures, there’s no telling what he might be up to.” He seemed truly worried at the prospect and unconsciously gripped his bad leg, rubbing it absently. There was a strange sound rising from the water behind them; a sound that might have at first been mistaken for the cry of gulls. Groves squinted out into the churning water towards the ship, noticing that it was pitching violently back and forth in the swell. “What’s happening?” he asked nervously. The sound was causing him to tremble without really knowing why. Blindly he reached for something to grab and found Barbossa’s sleeve.

Hector noted the interaction, but his attention was on the ship. The sound was growing louder and clearer, and to men who had never encountered a supernatural thing it was just the wind howling. But he knew it was something much worse. "All men out of the long boats! Now! On shore, all of you!" He barked down to the landing party, who were still hauling supplies upon the beach. They looked at each other in confusion, but had learned better than to question his command.

In the distance The Providence seemed swept by the tide, and now the sound from the water was matched by the helpless screams of men. Sea foam churned and frothed beneath the ship's haul, and as they squinted in the wind they could see that the foam was actually figures, grasping and clawing, dragging frightened sailors down to the depths.

"Mermaids!"

Gillette gawked, hardly able to believe what he was seeing. "They're...taking down the ship!" he gasped. This seemed to send a panic through the other men on shore, but Hector remained silent, glaring into the distance. "Well? Do something!" the younger officer shouted at him.

"And what would you have me do, officer?" Barbossa answered. "This peg leg of mine not be a magic wand."

"Poor souls," Gibbs muttered, crossing himself and shaking his head sadly. It was then that Groves turned upon him, "We have to help them!"

"How? If ye were to venture back into those angry waters, Lt. Groves, you and any one else fool hardy enough to enter would be shredded to ribbons within seconds. Mermaids are not unlike sharks. Something has stirred their ire against man, never mind their instinctive need to mate and feed. You can do nothing for your friends now, except pray for their souls. The mermaids will be inclined to take the rest."

Groves looked at Barbossa in utter frustration, shaking with suppressed anger. He seemed about to explode, when something below the pier caught his attention. "Sir, look out!"

Barbossa glanced down just as a hand shot up from the water, curling it's long fingers around the wood of his artificial limb. The woman it belonged to looked up at him sternly, her long damp blonde hair flowing down her back and shoulders, barely hiding her exposed breasts and torso, all which appeared very human, but below the water's sloshing surface they could see the glitter of scales and a long fanned tail that stretched at least five feet in length. They were staring a mermaid right in the face.

The surrounding sailors reached for their weapons, ready to fire on her, but Barbossa raised a hand and staved off the attack. "Hector Barbossa, favorite of Calypso," she spoke, her voice lovely but commanding and somehow dangerous. "Your kind are no longer welcomed in these waters."

Hector removed his hat and bowed graciously to her, keeping eye contact with the woman as the men around him gawked. "Spare the lives of my men upon shore, m'lady and forgive us our trespass. We have no wish to harm you or your sisters. Remember your oath."

Her nails dug into the wood of his leg and she lifted herself a bit higher upon the pier. "The pirate known as Blackbeard has killed many of us, stolen our treasured sword from it's sacred place, and kidnaped one of our sisters. Why should we honor our agreement?"

"Let us pass unharmed and I swear to you, Daughter of the Atlantis, I will make him pay for all his

transgressions with blood." This seemed to sate her and she released her dangerous grip upon his leg, becoming more relaxed and somehow more alluring. Beside him Groves stammered, "You're talking to it! You're talking to one of those–!"

Hector slapped a hand over his mouth before he could say something insulting and anger her again. Groves whimpered, feeling another set of hands plucking at his legs and feet from behind, and saw that several more of the mysterious creatures had surrounded them beneath the dock. The other sailors, weapons trained upon them, were caught between fear and instant attraction. "Keep your wits, and be silent!" Hector hissed in warning. "Mermaids do not suffer humans lightly." He knelt upon the dock so that he could speak face to face with the sea woman; "A favor my lady, if I may?"

She grinned fondly at him, stroking his beard, and Hector felt a little of her strange magic seeping into him, heightening his awareness and banishing the lingering pain from his body. "Speak it."

"Have you seen Jack Sparrow?"

She giggled, much to the surprise of the rest of the men. "Witty Jack. Yes, during the battle. He was taken by the villain called Blackbeard, along with our sister. He tried to rescue her from her place upon the rocks, but was thwarted." Hector nodded in understanding, feeling himself being drawn a little closer to her as she endeavored to pull him into the surf with her. But he was too wise in the ways of sea to allow it. "Will you not follow?" she asked, almost sadly. He smiled at her; "Perhaps another time, lass. I have grown too old and too feeble to please."

"I wouldn't mind obliging," Gibbs grinned, moving dangerously close to one of the other lurking females. Barbossa waved him off with his crutch however, much to the old sailor's dismay. "But Admiral! A kiss from a mermaid is a sure way to stave off drowning!" He argued.

"The only drowning you have to worry about, Mr. Gibbs, is in a bottle." He hoisted himself up again, almost without the use of his crutch at all and started up the beach once more. "Step lively men! The Fountain awaits, and we've already fallen behind!"

He had taken no more than a few labored steps up the sandy shore when Groves came bounding up behind him and came to stand in front of him. "How can you just stand there and make deals with that–that–!"

"Calm yourself, Theodore," Hector grunted, not wanting to deal with his hysterics at the moment. He felt as though he had lost too much time already. "It's Lieutenant Groves, sir." the young man corrected sharply, surprising Hector into stopping his pace. He leaned upon his crutch, staring the tall, tan young man down. His face was a mask of fury and uncertainty, and he seemed to tremble as he blocked him. "I have come to conclusion, sir, that you do not give a damn about this mission, or the men who follow you! All you care about is finding those pirates and getting revenge or whatever it is you're after! You have no honor, no decency!"

"Those be hard words, Lieutenant," Hector spoke carefully. "Are they yours? Or are you simply a mouth piece?" His eyes flickered to Gillette as he spoke this, and the other officer bolstered, as if urging Groves to continue.

"I speak of my own free will," Theodore growled, his voice tightly controlled, for it threatened to crack with emotions that he could barely restrain. "I told you before, I am no sheep to be lead!" The Lieutenant raised a hand to strike him, but Hector caught it deftly, staring him down. "If you mean to challenge me and my authority, Lieutenant, then let us settle this like gentlemen, in

private."

"Fine!" He stalked towards the jungle thicket ahead, Hector limping after. Gibbs called after him worriedly, "Are you sure you won't be wanting a mediator?"

"Stay out of this Joshamee!" Barbossa barked back, disappearing after the boy. The former first mate sighed dejectedly and scratched at his sunburned neck as he lingered awkwardly near Gillette. "So," the young officer asked then, clearing his throat, "is it true, what they say about a mermaid kiss?"

In the brush, Groves finally came to a stop when he could no longer easily hear the screams from the bay. He whirled on Barbossa as he struggled through the overgrowth, pointing his sword at him, but the Admiral did not seem particularly threatened by it; "You do realize that I could have you stripped of your position for that little outburst back there." he said with no small amount of irritation in his voice.

"And what will you do with me? Lock me in the brig?" Groves mocked, his voice high and strangely tight. "How could you? How could just let them die out there?! They trusted you!" he ranted, distraught at once again seeing his fellow sailors, good, honest men, die by the wicked doings of pirates and their link to the supernatural world. "You can communicate with those monsters, then order them to stop!"

Hector shook his head. "I can no more stop a hurricane than I could that feeding frenzy. It's not the way of things." He looked bitter, perhaps even remorseful. But Theodore could only see coldness in his eyes.

"Is it? Or is it simply so because you declare it? I am growing weary of the world according to your view!"

"Sounds as if you're threatening mutiny. Is that it?"

Hector knew this had little and nothing to do with his command, and everything to do with their undefined relationship to each other. "Gibbs was right," he muttered tiredly, feeling frustrated and overwhelmed by the events of the last few days. "Right about what?" Groves demanded. "That you were just using me as a plaything while you bid your time getting back to your beloved Jack Sparrow?"

"I love Jack. I've made no secrets about it."

The anger on the other man's face wavered, replaced by sadness and disappointment. "Then it's true." He muttered bitterly, lowering his weapon. "Everything you said...was it a lie?"

"No!" Hector barked, throwing his hat in irritation into the brush. "Dammit boy, what the hell is it ye want from me?!"

Groves threw down his sword, stormed towards the Admiral, took his face between his hands and kissed him hard. Hector was taken off guard by the action as he was knocked off balance, both of them falling to the soft grass covered ground in a heap. Theodore did not break contact for several long seconds, his lips devouring Hector's. The Admiral in turn held the younger man tightly

against him, caught between his temper and his lust. He finally pulled his lips away from the younger mans' and replaced them on his neck, tearing open his collar to expose his smooth tan skin. Theodore yelped pleasurably, clutching the other man against him for several more minutes before wrenching away and drawing a dagger from his belt and holding it lightly to Barbossa's throat to stop his advances; "I have to know the truth, Barbossa! Am I yours, or am I not?"

Hector twisted his wrist, forcing him to drop the knife and pushed the man flat upon the ground so that he could lean over him and tear him from his clothing. "Aye, I'll make it so!" He muttered, kissing him hard again as he tore him out of his coat and vest, flinging them carelessly along the plants and trees, needing to feel bare skin under his fingers. He wanted to loose himself in the mindless, animal act of raw sex, but also needed to feel that he wasn't alone, that he was still needed, wanted, desired. Jack hovered in the forefront of his mind, and Hector wished desperately that he was here in his arms again. But he wasn't, and for the moment he could not change that. The man below him had given him a strange new sense of self, of purpose, of power. Hector hadn't felt that in too long, and his growing need to protect the man beneath him, who moaned and gasped as he ran his hands and tongue over his hot, sweat beaded skin only muddled his feelings more. Was this possible? Could he really feel the same thing for two people? He'd always been a man of divided heart, torn between two worlds and two identities. He was too old, he couldn't face the conflict of that again. But the feelings remained. So he resolved that two halves must somehow join together. How yet he didn't know, but for the moment all his focus was upon young Theodore Groves.

The Lieutenant put up a semblance of resistance, though he really did not want the treatment to stop. It was something he'd been fantasying about for weeks, perhaps even months. Hector's mouth and hands seemed everywhere, and he was stunned by the man's expertise, even more so his vitality. He had never known sex could be like this; for in his world it had always seemed a cold, passionless ordeal that was simply necessary to produce heirs, or in some cases simply the product of some lurid, tawdry affair that was always hidden away in the dark like a dirty secret.

But now, here, with Barbossa he saw it could be something else. Something beautiful, intense, savage and intimate, free of compromises and repressions. But now that it was actually happening he found that there was a growing fear in his chest of what it might actually be like. Hector saw it in his eyes, felt it in his tense muscles; but he was beyond sympathy for it now. After several more minutes of heated, rough kissing, in which Theodore was stripped of all but his shirt and leggings, leaving Barbossa completely naked save for his trousers, which had been unbuttoned and pulled down below his thighs, Hector rolled the man flat upon his stomach and pushed himself between his legs. "Hang on tightly, luv, this will be a bit rough..." He warned, breath harsh and hot against the delicate shell of Grove's ear. The man looked back at him pleadingly, afraid for what would come next but not wanting it to stop. "Hector, I–!"

Barbossa couldn't wait any longer, the support of his one good leg already beginning to falter, his overwhelming need taking over all other senses, slicked himself up as best he could and pushed forward. "HECTOR!" Theodore cried, hands digging into the soft grassy earth beneath him as he felt one push, then another before Barbossa was fully inside him.

Hot pain raced up his back, and the sting of it made him whimper and twitch. Hector panted heavily behind him, lying across his taut back, kissing his quivering skin and wrapping a hand around his middle to help support him. "Shhh, luv...the pain will pass." he promised. He worried briefly that the sudden intrusion to an obvious virgin like Groves would prove to be too overwhelming, but was pleasantly surprised when the man below him rocked back into him, eager to continue. "Please...please...!"

The bearded man chuckled, kissed the sensitive spot at the nape of the younger man's neck, dug his feet into the soft ground and rocked forward roughly. Groves yelled his name into jungle again, growing possibly more rigid between his thighs, face dark red. Barbossa slid his hand down the smooth, tight muscle of his lower stomach and took him in his hand as he developed a rough pace behind him, feeling the man twitch at the contact and whimper beautifully.

Groves tried to maintain a dignified silence, but could not help grunting and moaning into every collision of their hips, feeling a little like a cheap whore as he did. He'd simply not experienced anything so fulfilling, so all consuming. He felt surely as if the electrified nerves in his groin were attached to every other nerve along his legs and up into his stomach.

He turned his head, looking over his shoulder and catching a glimpse of the man making love to him. He expected to see more strain upon the man's face, for certainly he was doing the brunt of all the physical work, balancing his weight mostly upon his hands and one good knee. But rather than exerted or exhausted, Hector looked enraptured and contented, happy to be with him. The pace grew rougher then, Barbossa losing his fight with gravity and balance and driving deeper into the other man, making him shout and moan raggedly as the ball of nerves hidden inside him was struck repeatedly. Hector came first, shuddering and giving a yell of his own as he emptied inside the other man. Theodore trembled at the strange sensation and put his hand over Barbossa's between his thighs to remind him how close he was. Hector obliged, sinking his teeth into Theodore's shoulder blade. "Hector...oh, Hector...it's too good...HECTOR!"

Barbossa laid upon him for a few trembling more seconds, dislodged himself from the man and fell limply onto his side, breathing harshly. "By the powers, man...!" he breathed, falling into a blissful exhaustion that could only be brought on my intense orgasm. Beside him Groves was still rasping for air, shaking and sweating. Hector put a careful arm around him, pulling him against his chest. "Are you alright?"

When Groves lifted his face towards the other man's however, he saw that despite his trembling, he seemed elated, if not shocked and a bit exhausted. "That...was...was...!" He couldn't think of a word that would properly describe it. Barbossa fell to chuckling against his shoulder, relieved he hadn't harmed the lad or made him regret this decision. "You're somethin' else, lad, that's for sure..." He groaned a little at the pain radiating up his own back and down into his thighs. He hadn't had sex since Jack, and it had been under different circumstances. He'd forgotten how much exertion it was, especially considering all he had to compensate for, given his leg.

"I didn't know it could be like that."

Barbossa nuzzled his neck, letting his fingers play along the curve of the man's skull, feeling the short dark bristles of his hair. "The right man, the right time..." he nodded thoughtfully. Groves leaned up and kissed him and then made to lift himself up.

"I wouldn't..."

"Oh it's fine, I'm–OW!" He had no sooner attempted to sit than the forgotten pain lanced through him again, causing him to fall back down whimpering. Barbossa rolled his eyes. "No one ever listens," he sighed. "Just...lie here a minute, will ya? Give an old man a rest."

They laid quietly together in the grass for awhile, staring up at the sky as it began to clear above the canopy of trees, hearing the birds and insects and the sound of the waves as they grew calm again. It felt like a storm had passed, but there was still something in the air.

Finally still resting in the crook of Barbossa's arm, Groves voiced it; "What about Jack?"

Barbossa smiled in spite of the seriousness of the moment. Somehow his life seemed to keep going back to that same question;"What about Jack?"

"It be a hard thing to explain, Theodore," the old pirate began at length, looking up at the sky. "Jack and I go back a lifetime. He's part of me, much as I'm a part of him. Things between us haven't always been... 'friendly', but none the less, I find myself bound to him."

"Oh." Groves said softly. "Sounds very complicated."

"That be an understatement." He laid his arm across his forehead, closing his eyes for a moment in thought. "I don't know yet what part you have to play in my life, but I hope that it's a lasting one."

"You mean...you want us both?"

"If you want to put it bluntly, yes."

Groves tried to wrap his mind around the concept, but couldn't seem to grasp it. "Oh Hector...I'm not sure that's enough for me." He rolled towards him, pushing himself up on his elbows so that he was leaning over the other man. "Aren't you concerned that one of us might become jealous?"

Barbossa stroked his cheek lightly. "I've known the green-eyed monster well. It caused me to make the biggest mistake of my life, and so it can no longer have a place in it." But Groves still looked unsure, and he figured that if their places were switched, he would feel much the same way.

Again Groves tried to stand up, fumbled, and finally made it into a crouched position, supporting himself against a tree as he fumbled with his clothing. "Does it...ah! Always sting this much afterwards?"

Hector redid his own clothing with surprising deftness, but couldn't quite get to his feet. "First time's always the worst; simply how it's all designed. The next few won't be as bad." He extended his hand and Groves pulled him up quickly, getting beneath his arm and allowing the other man to lean upon him. The two stared awkwardly into each other's eyes, unsure of where to go from here. Theodore licked his lips nervously as they limped along together, one supporting the other equally, "I want you to know that I don't regret it. What just happened. Or any of it."

"You needn't make apologies or excuses," Hector said, a bit dejectedly. "I–," but Theodore turned and silenced him with another kiss. It was then that they were met by Gibbs and Gillette, who had begun to worry about their absence.

"Uck...!" The old sailor muttered at the sight of the two men in the lip lock and looked away hurriedly, rubbing his brow tiredly. "I should have known, but like the sentimental old git I am I was starting to worry."

Gillette was staring hurriedly between the two men, looking pale and abashed. "Oh GOD...you two were...in the middle of the bloody jungle!? Are you savages?!"

"Oh don't be such a jealous little cow, Giulliam. It's truly unattractive." Groves turned up his nose at the smaller man, putting his arms a little tighter around Hector, "Come Admiral, we really should be getting underway."

"Right you are. Mr. Gibbs, if you'd so kindly point the way?" Grumbling Gibbs obliged, leaving

Gillette to gawk alone as they called for the surviving troops to follow.

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Chapter 7

Jack came to in an odd position, feeling great pressure across his stomach, as his head jostled freely back and forth in a swaying motion. Squinting through the soreness of his face, he found himself staring at the backside of one Philip Swift, whom it seemed had been given the burden of baring the unconscious pirate as they trekked through the dense and uncharted jungle landscape.

It wasn't the worst sight Jack had ever woken up to before; in fact he had never really noticed how well sculpted the young man was before. "Oy!" he grunted, head pounding from all the blood rushing to it. "Not that I'm not enjoying the view, but I feel certain that my head is about to pop like a grape." Philip stopped immediately, startled by the sudden sound and lowered Jack to his feet. "Captain Sparrow!"

Jack held his throbbing face, feeling dizzy at the shift of blood flow in his body, but shook the affect off. "I had no idea that old devil could throw a left like that." he muttered, feeling his slightly swollen cheek bone and wondering if it wasn't cracked. He looked around at the new surroundings curiously; "Where are we?"

"No idea. We've been walking for hours." Philip answered, speaking quickly as they were approached by Gunner and the Quartermaster, who were bringing up the rear of the crew, making sure that none of the men became so inclined to run off and abandon their mission. The two took up pace with the others, Jack trying to get his bearings. It had been dark last he recalled, but it was now clearly morning, moving towards midday. They could be any number of miles inland, and he had been rendered too incapacitated to even leave a so-called "breadcrumb trail" for Barbossa. Rescue seemed less likely than ever, until he noted that the party ahead of them had come to a sudden stop.

As they marched along the line, they saw another group of zombie officers baring the glass coffin containing the captured mermaid. Both men looked at her with a mix of pity and fascination. In such little water, she had retained much of her glamoured human appearance, and seemed all the more a figure of sympathy, her large dark eyes watching them through the glass. "She's so...small." Philip said softly, unable to help his stare. Jack put his palm against the glass, as if reaching out for the girl. "She may appear to be delicate and frail, but believe me when I say that it is only appearance. Were she in the water again, she'd likely make them all pay for this indignity." To Jack, whom had dealings with mermaids in the past, he knew that this one was young, probably no more than a few centuries old, and therefore had been easy prey for their ruthless snare. If she had been one of her elder sisters, she would have broken free from this prison before they had ever left the beach. "It's my fault," Philip said remorsefully. "I struck her with my sword, when I thought she was attacking you." He looked pleadingly at the beautiful young woman. "Do you think she understands me?"

"Most certainly." Jack nodded.

She watched them closely from the confines of the glass, but never spoke a word. One of the zombies gave an unintelligible grunt and jabbed at the two of them, making them step aside. "She'll not survive long in there." Jack muttered worriedly. "For all his dealings with the supernatural, Blackbeard seems to understand frightfully little about it's laws."

Jack made his way up to the front of the line, spotting Blackbeard and Angelica, who were peering over the edge of a chasm. There had once stood the remains of an ancient foot bridge, but it had long been destroyed, leaving only rotting rope and broken planks dangling off the edge of the hundred foot drop into the river below.

“It seems we have come to an impasse.” Blackbeard said, his lined and dark face souring at the set back. His eyes fell upon Sparrow, who made his presence known then. “Which way now?”

Jack pointed to the right, motioning down the long line of trees along the chasm wall, “We’ll have to go East and make our way around. It’s about a day’s journey.”

“I can not afford to waste that kind of time.”

The pirate shrugged his shoulders, dread-locked hair and beads jostling, clinking and clanking together. “Well that’s a pity for you then, because unless you intend to sprout wings and fly, I don’t see how else you intend to get over this little roadblock, as it were.” He grinned slyly, taking some pleasure in the other captain’s frustration. In reply Blackbeard simply pulled one of his many pistols from his belt and pointed it squarely at Jack’s head. “I need those Chalices.”

Sparrow scoffed as he peered down the loaded barrel. “Shoot. Save me the bother of the fall.” The other men of the crew stared at him, wondering if Jack was truly being brave or just knocked silly from that punch to realize what he was saying.

“Is he mad?” Shandy whispered.

“Has to be.” Scrum scoffed.

Blackbeard turned his pistol then to the woman standing to Jack’s right. “You will go, you will return. Or I will kill her.”

Angelica looked momentarily shocked at this threat, as did the rest of the crew. But Jack just scoffed; “You won’t kill your own daughter!” He stepped a little closer to the bearded man, who gazed curiously back at the brazen man, “You’re getting a little predictable, Teach. I mean...threatening the girl? That only works on sappy, love-struck heroes.” He gave him a crooked little grin. “Do I seem that type to you?”

“You pig!” Angelica snarled, kicking Jack in the shin and making him yelp. “It will not work, father, he cares for no one but himself!”

“Appearances, daughter, appearances.” Blackbeard reasoned. “Our dear Jack wants to appear to the world as if he is free as a bird, weighed down by nothing. But I have seen his heart, and know differently.” He cocked back the hammer of his pistol and pointed it squarely at Angelica again, and made to fire. Jack put a hand hurriedly upon his arm, pushing it to the ground. “So much like your father. Always a fool for a woman.”

Jack frowned deeply at the reference but did his best to brush it off. “If you’re so keen to kill her, why don’t you just let her jump?”

She kicked him again and Jack glared at her. “You would prefer to be shot?!” he muttered.

“If you jump, and die, then she shall have her chance.” The old man reasoned, seeming unaffected by the fact that he had just threatened his own kin. Sparrow chewed his lip for a moment, uncertain of what to do. Beside him Teach sighed heavily, took the voodoo doll from it’s place in his coat, showing it to Sparrow. “Is it certainty you need?” Before Jack could protest, the man had stepped to the edge of the cliff and chucked the doll over the side. Sparrow screamed; for though he was

firmly upon the ground he felt surely as though he were falling through the air towards the rocks and water below. Eventually the sensation stopped and he collected himself, covering his mouth to stave off his outburst.

“Is that it?”

“I think so.”

He peered over the edge again, a new sense of relief dawning on him. The former woman of Seville looked towards the leather clad pirate, her dark eyes wide. “Father! What have you done?” she gasped. “You’ve thrown away our bargaining chip!”

“Have I now?”

She seemed flustered by his feigned ignorance. “What makes you think this snake will return?”

“Yes, what makes you?” Jack chimed in over her shoulder.

Blackbeard smiled easily and opened the flap of his coat, revealing that the effigy of Jack was safely back inside his pocket. Sparrow’s eyes budged, mouth gaping as he pointed. “How did...you just...it’s not–!”

Stammering and stuttering, Blackbeard backed the hapless pirate up to the edge of the chasm. “Goodbye Jack.” And gave him a hard push. Jack screamed once more as he went tumbling out into space. The others surged forward, watching as the screaming man finally splashed down into the river below. “You’ve killed him!” Shandy shouted. Blackbeard cuffed him for his trouble and watched the water’s surface. Sure enough, Jack emerged a few seconds later, bobbing momentarily before beginning to swim. He chuckled heartily. “I must admit, I am starting to develop a fondness for that scallywag.”

“Don’t be fooled. He’s not as charming as he looks.” Angelica scoffed, leaning away from the edge of the cliff. She turned to the man beside her, “Father...were you really going to shoot me?”

Blackbeard drew her to him, cooing consolingly and stroking her hair, fingers playing along the sleek line of her long neck; “Of course not, dearest. I would never, ever let any harm come to you. I love you.”

Her eyes welled with grateful tears and she leaned into him then, putting her arms around his shoulders as he drew her into a fierce kiss, shoving her against the trunk of a tree in an effort to get more contact. The rest of the crew, unnerved by the sight, looked away awkwardly. Except for Philip, who suddenly surged forward, taking his leather bound bible in hand and began beating Blackbeard around the head shoulders with it; “Stop it! Stop it! This is an affront to the Lord! You sick, cowardly, black-hearted fiend!”

Salaman, Scrum and Shandy winced at the missionary’s harsh words. “Now he’s gone and done it,” the portly minstrel chuckled, eyes gleaming. “Should have just kept his nose out of it, says I.”

Blackbeard turned slowly towards the assaulting man, eyeing him questionably. Philip raised the book to strike him again, but he caught it and twisted it out of his grip. “I am in a bewilderment,” the old pirate said slowly. “For I can hardly believe that our handsome and stoic pacifist would have the nerve to strike at me while my back is turned.”

“Philip, stay out of this.” Angelica warned him.

“You should be ashamed,” the man replied, “both of you! This man is your father, yet you allow him to fornicate with you? It’s disgusting! Shameful!” But before young Swift could utter another negative adjective to describe his abject disdain for the situation at hand, Blackbeard had grabbed him by the throat, flung him about and held him, teetering off the edge of the cliff. “Speak out of turn again, boy, I will drop you like a stone. I doubt you have as much luck of missing the rocks as Jack did.”

Philip gazed dizzily down the drop below, feet trying to dig into the earth and take firm hold. Blackbeard pulled him back a little then, “It would be a shame to waste such a fine specimen of male beauty, however.” he added thoughtfully. Philip’s confused eyes met his, not quite understanding. Seeming to reconsider his actions, he released the man, sending him stumbling to the ground and threw his beloved text back at him. “I would be very, very careful young man. Your fate teeters upon the edge of a knife,” he glanced at his daughter out of the corner of his eye, “and there will not always be someone around to save you.”

“I need no one’s protection but the Lord’s.” Philip answered hotly.

Blackbeard chuckled deeply. “We’ll see about that.” He turned then, coat tails fanning behind him in the breeze and called for his men to move forward down the Eastern slope of the cliff. The cabin boy moved to the fallen man’s side, offering him a hand up. “Did he hurt you?”

“No,” Philip said, but he did not sound so sure of himself. Something in Blackbeard’s dark, soulless eyes had spooked him. He gave the boy a thin smile, hoping to lift his spirits. “You needn’t fear for me, Shandy. I walk with the Lord.”

“Lot of good that will do you,” Scrum cackled next to them as they took up pace again. “You don’t seem to understand the trouble you’ve invited, mate. You see, the Captain now finds himself wanting a plaything as it were, for his more...uh... ‘brutal’ tendencies, since dear ol’ Jack is now unavailable.”

Beside them Salaman rolled his dark eyes and groaned. “I rather fear the imbecile is somewhat correct in this assumption.” he warned. “But do not forget that you have the protection of the First Mate, as well as your God. Or at least, it would seem.”

Philip did not fully understand what they were hinting at, for though he had cared for Jack’s injuries after being tormented by Blackbeard, he had never fully understood the nature of them. When he’d seen the teeth marks upon the pirate’s shoulders and neck, he had assumed that it was from some cannibalistic act, or perhaps some primitive way of spilling blood. Philip was a man naive in the ways of not only women, but men as well, and it had never crossed his mind that Blackbeard would look at him as an object of desire.

Troubled by the cackling of his comrades, the young missionary fell behind until he found himself walking along the mermaid’s tank once again. She seemed tortured inside that small glass cage that was clearly insufficient in size and depth to contain her natural form. She looked frightfully pale in a sickly sense, and her large dark eyes seemed sadder than ever as she watched him. “Can you understand me?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

Her stark answer startled him a little, but he smiled. “I want to help you.”

“Then free me.”

He pressed his hand tentatively against the glass as Jack had, and she put her hand against his. “You have my solemn vow, I will make this right. You shall come to no harm by these men.” She nodded in understanding, seeming to look into his soul. What she saw there gave her hope that he would keep his promise, for Philip was not like so many other humans she had encountered before. There was a spark of something in him; something special, unique.

Behind him Gunner cracked his whip and bellowed for him to move faster. Philip took up pace again, but remained near the tank, keeping a watchful eye upon it’s beautiful prisoner.

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The sun traveled hurriedly overhead, and soon the slant of it’s rays through the thick trees and the heat could be felt past the noon marker, falling into the West. Blackbeard gazed at it harshly, as if trying to hold it in it’s position and keep time from passing in it’s entirely. He had but a few days left now before the prophecy would come to pass. The wicked man, for all his callousness and brazen, cruel deeds, was not immune to fear. He felt like a hunted thing, stalked by fate and death and time, and most of all the dreaded aberration of “the one legged man”. It might have lessened his anxiety to be able to put a face to the name, but such things were rarely so specific, or they would have been far more easy to avoid.

Trudging along the thick underbrush, careful of upraised roots and creeping vines, Blackbeard could swear that he felt the icy breath of death on the nape of his neck. There was a movement off to his right, and he whirled, drawing one of the pistols from his belt and fired blindly. The resulting gunshot cracked through the heavy humid air, startling all of them.

Angelica, who had been leading the way, stopped and rushed back to him, taking hold of his poised arm. “What are you doing?” she gasped. He did not look at her at once, staring nervously into trees. She followed his gaze, expecting to catch sight of some wild animal or an intruder. But there was nothing. Carefully she lowered his firing arm and turned his face towards her, threading her fingers through his beard. “It is alright. I will let no harm come to you.”

He kissed her hand gratefully, returned his pistol to his belt and began to walk again, a bit more slowly than before. “He is out there, somewhere. Whether he knows it or not, he is coming for my blood.”

“We will be at the Fountain long before he can reach you,” the woman at his side reassured, keeping hold of his arm as they walked. She had been sailing with the man for nearly a year now, and since the prophecy, she had watched him deteriorate from a proud, ruthless ruler of the seas, to a paranoid, isolated and angry man. It would torture anyone, she reasoned, to foresee his own doom at the hands of another. Angelica had reasoned that this vision had made Blackbeard question his many terrible deeds, and the fate of his own immortal soul. Growing up in a convent, she had seen many men like him. For a time they thought themselves invincible, above the laws of man and God. But sooner or later, they all had to face their sins, and began to seek redemption before the final blow could be struck.

And in Edward Teach's case, after years of dabbling in the darkest places of the world, learning the black and forbidden arts and honing his skill of how to use them against his fellow man; he had much to fear. There was one particular crime that caused Teach's soul to shudder, but the nature of it had never fully been revealed. Angelica, through rumor and stories, had managed to piece together that it had involved one of Teach's lovers, who had forsaken him and married another. He had murdered the one his lover had forsaken him for, and left them to die of grief.

His soul was in tatters, twisted by dark magic, regret and envy. Angelica, in her own blindness, had begun to believe that he could yet be saved. If they reached the Fountain, and Teach gained all that he dreamed, he would become immortal. She wanted to be sure that if this happened, someone would be there to make sure he did not return to the same wicked ways. It was a noble intention. But somewhere along the line, she had become twisted herself, dragged down with him into the dark. She was blind to her own misdeeds, and the blood being spilt, all to give one condemned and wicked man more time upon this Earth, and she herself as well.

"Yes," Teach answered dully. "We must."

He removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his lined forehead, calling for a rest. She helped the aging man sit down upon a slope and knelt beside him, removing a canteen of water from her belt and holding it to his lips. He drank liberally, and smiled at her. "Where would I be without you?"

Angelica kissed his hand and held it close to her cheek. "What if Jack does not return with the chalices?" she spoked worriedly then. Blackbeard fanned himself with his hat thoughtfully as the other men settled around them, groaning and grumbling. "He will return. There is something you must understand about men, daughter. In our old age, we become sentimental..." He looked at her knowingly behind his dark ringed eyes; "Sparrow has regrets. He feels responsible for allowing you to fall into this life. Conscience, though God knows I've never had the curse of it, is said to be a powerful thing."

Angelica wished she could believe that, but her last conversation with Jack made her feel differently. "He does not love me, father. Not as I have loved him."

"Then there is always the doll."

She admired the straw effigy, turning it over in her hands, remembering the power it had given her over the other man. She relished that power, and longed for it again. "Once we obtain the tear, and reach the Fountain with the chalices..." she began quietly, "who then do we offer as a sacrifice?"

"Your choice, Angelica, must be your own. We have any number of witless lambs for the slaughter here. As for myself...it is the life of the one legged man I seek." She felt a chill race down her spine at this declaration, for this would mean a dangerous encounter with the man fated to kill him, but she knew his mind could not be changed. "Will you not take Sparrow's life as repayment for his misdeeds?"

Before Angelica could answer, she looked up and saw that they were being spied upon by none other than Philip, who had been watching and listening from the edge of the tree line. She stood, handing the doll back to her father, and marched towards him. The missionary did not move from his place, but he gripped his bible a bit more tightly. "What did you hear?" she hissed, brandishing a knife at him.

"Only what you plan to do with Jack Sparrow once he returns." the young man muttered, surveying her with deep disappointment. "You endeavor to save the blackest soul of all, my lady, and I can not fault your valor. But you are losing sight of yourself! How can you trade one soul for another?"

It was only under Philip's scrutiny that Angelica felt truly exposed, bereft of her self delusions and the lies of the man she had so unfortunately come to love. But she had come too far now, and she could no longer turn aside. There was no place for her back in Spain. She had been sullied, marked as an undesirable woman thanks to Jack Sparrow. She had done things, seen things, that there was just no going back from. "Because that is the way of the world," she answered sharply. "It is a hard, cruel, unfeeling place with little pity and kindness for the weak. I have kept my vow, and I have kept you from harm, Mr. Swift. But if you continue to interfere...!" She flicked the edge of her dagger dangerously beneath his chin, but Philip did not flinch.

"I fear no death." He answered calmly. "Do you?"

She stammered at him, then marched away, hair flying, clutching at the crucifix around her neck. It felt tainted, tarnished.

Once she had gone, the missionary scurried back to the rest of the waiting crew, who were damp with sweat, hungry and exhausted. Scrum, stringy brown hair dangling down in front of his face, struggled to catch his breath as he held his stomach. "We've not anything to eat in two days! How much further must we go in this heat?" he moaned and bellyached.

Shandy swayed on his feet and slumped down beside the resting glass coffin, leaning upon the glass as if it would cool him. "I'm so tired. I can't go another step, I swear I can't."

The mermaid inside the tank coiled herself about, eyeing the smaller human. He looked back at her with wide, wondering eyes, afraid and fascinated. After all, he had seen first hand what a mermaid could do to an unwitting sailor. Scrum still had the bite marks upon his face from his so-called "kiss" that had nearly cost him his life.

"Don't be afraid," Philip assured, crouching beside him and offering the lad his own flask of water. "She's gentle."

"Gentle?!" Scrum scoffed. "That old sea hag will rip yer face off sure as look at ya!"

Philip gave him a scathing look that stunned him into silence then. "Alright, governor, I meant no offense...didn't know you was fond of fish." He chortled at his own joke. The others ignored him, their attention on their prisoner. Salaman gave her an inquisitive look, scratching his dark beard. "Can it speak?"

"Don't call her 'it'," Philip said briskly. The other man raised his eyebrows in amusement at this reply, but shrugged. "Very well then. What shall I call her?"

For this, Philip didn't have an answer. He looked to the woman in the tank once more. "Do you have a name?"

She blinked at him, but did not answer. The young man licked his lips a bit nervously, "Then I shall give you a name." The others looked at him expectantly and finally he utter; "Syrena."

"And what are you called, human?" she asked in her musical voice.

"Philip. Philip Swift."

"Syrena, I know that I deserve nothing from you for the harm I caused," the missionary spoke

softly, glancing nervously towards the Zombie guards, though they remained still and silent and unconcerned. “Blackbeard means to collect from you a tear. What is it’s purpose?”

“For thousands of years, we have been hunted by men. All for wicked reasoning. They have sought of our scales, our hair, even our flesh. All to stave off that which mortals fear most...death.” Her voice was calm, sweet and sad. They wanted to listen to it forever, even though they thought that their hearts might break by doing so. “Mermaids are immortal. We are as old as the sea, old as the moon. But even we can be hunted, trapped and killed. Yet we do not fear this end as you do.”

“Well, it may be because a human’s life is so dreadfully short and uncertain upon this globe,” Scrum chimed in. “We don’t have hundreds of thousands of years to contemplate life. A man in our profession has no guarantee of even seeing thirty or forty.”

“Scrum, be quiet.”

“Here now! I am a valuable part of this crew, and I can contribute intelligently towards the conversation, eh?” he muttered indignantly. The woman in the tank looked at him blandly. “If it pleases, you, Ms. Fish.”

“A mermaid’s tear, combined with the healing waters you seek...only this can invoke the favor of the gods, and grant mortals long and healthy life. But something must be given in return.”

“Another life.” Philip answered grimly, remembering his conversation. He was interrupted then by a heavy, ominous footstep and turned to find Blackbeard towering over them, his face a hard mask of anger. “What is this I see?” he muttered, “A conspiracy perhaps?”

“N-no, Captain!” Scrum gasped quickly, backing as far away from the rest of them as he could. “We would never–!”

“Quiet, Scrum. I know you are a gutless, spineless coward. Never would I believe you capable of such a thing,” his captain barked roughly, and Scrum grinned awkwardly, not sure whether to be pleased or insulted. “But you,” he pointed to Philip, who stood up nervously. “You have always outspokenly opposed me. I have ignored it as stupidity before now...but now...” He grabbed the man by the cross around his neck and dragged him forward. “Perhaps your God has told you of my untimely end, hmm? Perhaps you know the one legged man who stalks me? Or perhaps...she sent you.”

“She?”

“Blimey, he’s raving!” Shandy gasped, ducking into the tree line as he watched the madness in Blackbeard’s eyes increase.

“An avenging angel, perhaps? The woman who denied me my happiness?”

“What are you talking about?” Philip gasped, trying to struggle free, but could not. He felt the leather cord of his necklace pulling tighter and tighter against his throat. “Do not feign stupidity to ME, boy! You have been suspiciously chummy with that pirate, and why else would a man of the cloth be so, if you were not sent by her to destroy me!?”

He forced Philip to the ground and fell upon him. “I will not allow it! I will tear you apart from the inside out!” Suddenly beside them the tank rattled violently and fell to the ground. The glass shattered, and Syrena, carried upon a tide of spilling water, leapt at them, her fangs and clawed, webbed hands exposed in rage. She slashed violently at Blackbeard’s face, drawing a spray of

blood as the older pirate was thrown backwards. Angelica came racing forward, followed by several more zombie officers. She gaped at the sight of her father holding his wounded face, and the mermaid free from her prison.

She laid protectively coiled around Philip, and they watched as her long fanned tail began to molt and shed scattering shredded bits of tail fin and a glittering of scales across the ground and revealing two, pale human legs. Naked and shivering, transformed by her environment, she became vulnerable, but her stare was still threatening.

“Blimey,” Scrum breathed. “I didn’t know they could do that. Did you know mermaids could do that?” he asked to Gunner, who just stared at him with his mean, dead eyes. “Right. Why should you care, eh?”

Angelica fell beside her leader, seeing the deep scratches that had been torn from his forehead to his chin in a horizontal slash. It seemed to have blinded him in one eye, and torn the cheek to the bone in area. Frantic, the woman looked to the ground and saw one of Syrena’s glittering scales. She plucked it up and pressed it hard against the wounds. In moments, they began to close on their own. The others looked on in amazement, except for Philip, who was busy removing his shirt and wrapping it around the naked and shivering woman upon his lap to give her a bit of dignity.

“Thank you, daughter.” Teach gasped slowly when the pain had subsided. She helped him to his feet and they both stood, taking stock of the new situation. “If you have legs, bitch, then walk.”

Syrena, slowly made to stand. She was like a newborn fawn, unsure and unbalanced. But her weak limbs would not hold her and she tumbled. Philip caught her easily and swept her up in his strong arms. “Then I will carry her.”

Blackbeard leered at them both for a time, for he was still angry and anxious to take out his pent up frustrations upon a bit of beautiful flesh. But for now, that could not be. He turned then, hiking his way towards the front of the trail once more as Angelica called for movement. The hunt was on again.

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Each inch of the lush, dense landscape seemed more wild and fantastic than the rest. For a man who had spent all his life either aboard a ship, or in the confined and overcrowded streets of London, this tropical paradise was almost too grand and fantastic for Groves could imagine. When he had been stationed in Port Royal, he had seen jungles and such on the horizon of the island, but never had he been there himself. Now he almost regretted it; for though it was wild and seemingly dangerous, it held a beauty that no other place he’d known could capture.

It was his fascination with the land before him that made him slow to notice that their pace was beginning to lag. The pain in his own back, legs and hips had already begun to subside so that he did not pay it much mind. He’d been helping Barbossa along the unstable terrain as they followed the lead of the dubious Mr. Gibbs, when suddenly the Admiral called for a halt.

“Sir?”

As he glanced back at Hector’s face, he saw that he was sweating and stricken, gritting his teeth in pain. “I need a rest.”

Swiftly the officer helped him be seated upon a rock, and the former pirate immediately fell to rubbing and squeezing his damaged leg. This was far more activity, and certainly more walking, than Hector had done in months, and it was beginning to cost him. The raw nerves of his severed stump felt as if struck by fire, and the muscle itself was so tense that it felt harder than the rock he was sitting on. Gibbs came to stand beside them, looking down worriedly at the pained expressions of their leader. “You’re in a bad way,” he mumbled. “We should have stopped hours ago. Ah well, I suppose we’ve gained enough ground for the time. We should stop and get our bearings, give you a chance to–,”

“No!” Barbossa hissed, glaring up at him. “We’ve wasted enough time already. I just...need a moment. Then we’ll be moving on as long as their’s light to travel by.”

Groves shook his head worriedly; “Sir, if you press yourself now you may become too weary to travel all together.” He touched his face worriedly and Hector gripped his palm in reassurance. “I’m made of tougher things, my boy. Never doubt that.”

“I haven’t sir. Not once since I met you.”

Behind them, Gillette made a distasteful noise. “Have you something caught in your throat, officer?” Barbossa inquired bitterly. He was growing exceedingly tired of the puny little man and his distaste for himself and his relationship.

“No, sir. Just felt ill a moment.” he quipped, feeling smug and superior in his insult. But Barbossa didn’t respond in kind. Instead he just stared at him, eyes growing tremendously wide. “Do not move.” he said quickly, seriously.

“What?”

Hector was up with some difficultly then, limping hurriedly towards him. “Quick, give me that satchel! There’s a pair of tongs in there! Make haste!” The man behind Gillette, who had been carrying some of the Admiral’s personal affects looked startled at suddenly being called upon and then quickly produced said equipment. Gillette was quivering now, not knowing what was so urgent. It was then he felt a creeping upon his shoulder. His eyes turned, and to his surprise and disgust, he saw a brightly colored frog had fallen from a nearby branch and landed right upon his shoulder. “Oh!”

“Don’t touch it!” Barbossa hissed, grabbing the tongs and slowly, carefully reaching for the little amphibian. “You daren’t let it touch your skin. It secretes poison from it’s glands. You’d be dead in minutes.”

Gillette paled a full shade and began to quiver and whimper as Hector slowly removed the tiny frog, dropping it hurriedly into a glass jar, which curiously enough contained three more of the interesting little creatures.

“What the hell are you keeping it for?” Gibbs demanded, scratching his head.

“Can’t an old man have his hobbies?” Hector chuckled as he tucked the animal safely inside and tightened the lid. But instead of handing it back to the sailor who had been unwittingly carrying it,

he pushed it into Gillette's quivering hands. "Since you can find nothing better to do with your time," he smirked before limping away.

"But...but...what if they escape?!" he pleaded.

"Well, if you don't die, I'll be expecting you replace the ones you lost!" He took up his crutch again and started forward, ignoring pleas from both Groves and Gibbs, who had no choice but the follow. They had gone but a few yards when Hector came to a halt, staring out into the distance. In the distance, rising through the thinning trees, they could see a line of jagged rocks that stood above a rocky inland shore, and between it's jagged cliffs, stood the remains of an ancient and derelict ship.

"By the powers...!" Gibbs gawked.

"How did it get up there?" Theodore asked breathlessly. "Only one way. A great tidal wave must have picked her up and thrown her there and left her to rot. So much for the mysterious fate of the great Santiago."

"But...she must be two hundred years old!"

Barbossa started forward again, much to everyone's surprise. "Admiral? Sir, where are you going?"

"The chalices will be inside the ship with their master's remains."

"You can't mean to–!"

"Ye know any other way of retrieving them?"

Groves stuttered, looking pleadingly to Gibbs for answers, but he had none. Barbossa wasn't going to wait for the rest of his half-witted crew to catch up to him. He wagered that even with one leg, he would be more skilled at retrieving the prize than any other able bodied man. "At least let me go with you!" Theodore cried, running after him.

"Very well, ye may serve as my look out." he responded grudgingly, too proud to admit he needed the help. Theodore softened and smiled ruefully as he followed behind, directing Gibbs and the others to lie in wait and keep watch.

Standing now upon the pebbly beach, at the foot of the high jagged cliffs leading to the wreckage, Hector began to realize that he may have to admit that he was beaten. But if stubbornness ever dwelled in any heart, it was that of Hector Barbossa's. He taken little more than a few shaky steps up the cliff pass when he cried out and pitched forward. Theodore managed to catch him around the middle and ease him to the ground. Hector clutched at his leg, shaking as his thigh muscles spasm and twitched, baring his teeth and hiding his face against the side of Groves' neck. "Are you always this thick headed?" his younger lover chided, doing his best to ease the fallen man's shaking. He reached down, taking the tense, quivering muscle of Barbossa's battered leg in his hand began to kneed the muscles. Hector hissed at first, but slowly his muscles began to relax and the pain began to cease. He sighed in deep relief, keeping his head upon Theodore's broad shoulder as he laid against him. "That feels much better," he sighed blissfully. "I didn't know you had such clever hands."

Emboldened by the day's earlier exploits and feeling a new sense of closeness to the man resting in his arms. Once Hector had become completely relaxed, he moved his hand upward, working up his thigh towards his hip. Barbossa took little notice of the suspicious direction, knowing only how good it felt. Then he felt those same nimble fingers move further inward still until they were sliding purposefully over his groin and making him gasp. "Theodore...!" He looked up at the younger man in surprise, "You don't have to–!"

"I want to."

He bowed his head and kissed the older man, fingers still working steadily through the fabric of his trousers, feeling him grow warm and firm against his palm. "When else am I going to get you all to myself?"

Barbossa grinned and bit his lip, feeling a new pleasurable kind of tension building in his body. "There be more scoundrel in ya than I first guessed," he chuckled. "I've had an excellent teacher." his lover replied, nipping the tip of his ear and now working to free the man from the confines of his breeches. Hector allowed this to go on for as long as he could stand, allowing himself to surrender to the younger man's intentions for awhile. But as he grew closer to the edge, and became more and more aware of how warm and hard Groves was against his back, he sat up and turned, pulling the younger man into his lap as they sat together on the rocks, hidden in the shade from view. "Hector?"

"I don't want to be greedy." The pirate answered, sucking softly on the man's neck as he pulled them both close together and took them both in his thick hand. Theodore gasped loudly at this new, odd sensation of skin against skin, and gripped Barbossa's shoulders for support as they rocked together.

Hector's free hand snaked around the younger man's hip and grabbed his ass, squeezing it hard and digging his nails into the firm flesh. Theodore shouted his name, grinding against him and his hand, trying to gain more friction. He came first this time, shuddering and moaning as Hector continued abrasively rubbing them together until he too was spent.

Catching their breath, the red head chuckled and planted a playful little love bite on Grove's shoulder as he re-buttoned his shirt for him. "The curse of youth, yer damn insatiable." Although, rather than feeling spent by the activity, he felt invigorated, while Groves looked ready to curl up upon the rocks and nap.

They helped each other up again, and Hector was grateful that his muscles felt loose and limber once more. Now the cliffs above did not seem so insurmountable. The light in the sky was becoming yellow and orange as sunset approached. He would have to go soon, or loose an entire night. "Are you sure you'll be alright?"

Hector nodded to him, starting off again. "Keep a sharp eye and an open ear. I may need you to negociate a way down again."

"Aye, aye Ad–I mean, Hector." He grinned sheepishly. "I don't know if I'm ever going to get used to that."

"There'll be plenty of time for that later, luv."

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Jack scrambled over the summit of the rocks, his hands, knees and heels burning from the sun heated crags. He looked more in tatters than ever, but for nearly seven hours he had been a free man, and had traveled completely without incident. It was a relief to be traveling under his own will and own power again without fear of torture or death. At least in the immediate sense.

Part of him reasoned that he should make a run for it now, forsake all others and try to find a way off this rock. Perhaps, without the presence of it's fiendish captain and his dark magic, he could find The Queen Anne's Revenge and happily sail away for fairer tides. It would have been what the old Jack would do. But he found himself oddly invested in the fates of the unfortunate crew that shared this ill-fated journey with him. It would be cruel to abandon them now, without hope and without help. And he was getting too old to burn bridges.

At the summit, Jack stared at the curiously perched wreckage of the Santiago. Time and the elements had rotted it considerably, and there were any number of bird nests in it's rotting timbers of the mast, and the sails were not but sun-bleached rags in the wind. Even the proud flag of Ponce De Leon was practically lost to the ravages of time. "What an odd metaphor you are," Jack told the ship as he moved across it's creaking and warped deck. He could see any number of bleached bones of long dead sailors, who had met an rather unfortunate end here. And he noted with nervousness that any false step could cause him to fall right through the brittle wood, or cause a rock slide. "Why can it never be easy? For once, just once, I would love to go searching for some cursed relic in someplace safe and quiet."

He climbed the broken and weathered steps of the deck, leading up the captain's quarters. He was not surprised to see that the doors had been all but rotted away, dangling on broken, rust crusted hinges, full of insect and bullet holes. Jack pushed one open lightly with his fingers and heard a deafening creak as result. Inside the ravaged cabin, Sparrow saw laid out before him a treasure trove the likes no pirate of his own age could ever dream to acquire. Though covered in dust and consumed by creeping vines and roots that had twisted their way through any crack in the wood; he could still see lush draperies, mounds of blundered chests brimming with doubloons, pearls and jewels that would rival royal treasuries. Jack stepped forward cautiously and felt the slight sway of the deck beneath his feet. Such a feeling would not cause alarm if they had been properly upon the water; but dangling on the edge of a cliff with naught but rocks below was very different.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light of the cabin, he spotted the remains of the ship's once proud captain. Ponce de Leon had died comfortably in his own bed it seemed, a bit of parchment clutched in his boney hands, along with a magnifying glass. Jack grinned and made another careful step forward. Again the ship creaked and ancient dust shifted and created tiny clouds in the air.

Then there was another movement, this from the left of the cabin. Sitting in the dark, a figure moved. Jack instinctively reached for his sword, remembered it was still missing, and lifted one

from it's discarded place upon a forgotten heap of swag. "Don't touch anything, ye fool!" a familiar voice hissed.

Jack froze, startled by the voice, then smiled. "You."

Hector stepped carefully into the pool of light created by a hole in the deck above, smiling at his lover. "You're getting a bit slow, Jack."

"Hector!" Sparrow made to run for him, but the sudden movement caused another tremor from the ship as everything swayed to the left. Barbossa clutched the table for support. "Don't!" he hissed. "The whole rotting thing is barely sustaining itself! Any slight shift too far, and we'll be dashed to pieces on the rocks below us!"

Jack nodded in understanding. "Well...perhaps if we..." He saw a suit of armor standing in the corner. In an impulsive move, he turned the thing over, using it's sudden weight shift to compensate as he sprinted across the distance dividing him and the other man, launching himself into his arms. Hector grunted as he was knocked back by the embrace, forced to drop his crutch, clutching Jack with one arm and using the other to grip one of beams for balance as the boat shifted dangerously beneath their feet.

"You idiot! You could have killed us!" he chided, though only half-heartedly. Sparrow leaned up and kissed him passionately. "Worth it, mate."

They waited for the dust to settle again before attempting any movement. Barbossa clutched the other man close to him, allowing Jack's body to help hold him upright against the wall of the cabin. "I had no doubt you'd make it this far," Hector spoke then, looking his long time lover over with warmth in his eyes. "But I won't say that I didn't worry for you."

"You underestimate me, luv." Jack nodded. He reached around his neck, revealing Hector's lost necklace. The older pirate's blue eyes widened in the light. "How did you...?"

Jack slid the chain over his neck again, letting the pendant rest once more upon Barbossa's chest. "It's back where it belongs. And so am I." He leaned up to kiss him again, and Hector put his arms tightly around the other man's back in a fierce embrace. In doing so, he heard Jack give a whimper of pain, body tensing. This confused the other man, who pulled back to look at him, and noticed the dark marks upon Jack's exposed neck and chest. He pulled the smaller man away from him, yanking open the front of his shirt to reveal the barely healed scars from Blackbeard's mistreatment upon his skin. Barbossa's eyes boggled in the dim light, and Jack tried to cover the wounds hurriedly, feeling ashamed. "Who did this?" Hector breathed, trembling fingers tracing the etched figure of a trident over Jack's heart. The answer of course was obvious, and Hector felt hot molten rage churning in the pit of his stomach. "Blackbeard...I'll have his head for this!" he bellowed, enough to cause another small cascade of rocks to shift and fall above them.

Jack put his hands to his face, forcing him to make eye contact with him. "Now's not the time, darlin'. More pressing matters are at hand...namely what we both find ourselves up here looking for."

Barbossa clutched the other man close to comfort not only him, but himself and swallowed his hatred for the moment. "Aye, you're right. But we can hardly search the place can we?"

Jack surveyed the room again thoughtfully, scratching his beard. "Hmm...if I were good ol' Ponce over there, where would I hide my most prized possession?"

“Well, if it were you, you’d braid it into that rat’s nest you call hair.” Hector grumbled. “Like everything else.” He attempted to shift his weight to a more comfortable position, and in doing so caused another great shudder from the ship. Above them there was great crack as more rocks rained down from above. Barbossa ducked his head and flung Jack and himself forward just in time to avoid a falling boulder that crashed down through the deck right where they had been standing. The two pirates fell upon the bed together, covering each other as debris and dirt and splinters rained down over them.

Coughing in the dust, Barbossa leaned protectively over Sparrow, squinting. “Are ye alright?!”

“Good reflexes,” Jack coughed, looking past him to the new hole in the bottom of the deck. The ship now began to roll, ever so slowly towards the left, the remaining supplies in it’s hold rolling towards the new hole torn in it. There was the loud tinkling sound of coins and gold, skittering across the floorboards towards the opening, pouring out onto the cliffs below.

Jack and Hector clutched the ancient bedding as everything in the room began to shift, drawn down towards the ruined floor like a ship being pulled into a whirlpool. “Now you’ve done it!” Hector barked, gritting his teeth.

The ancient remains of Ponce de Leon shifted forward them, falling across them in a shower of bones. Jack yelped in disgust and hurled the beached, smiling skull and rib cage from him, sending it rattling to the floor. “Old Ponce was a little too eager for company, I guess.” he joked nervously.

From beneath the bed then something heavy lurched forward. They saw it at once. The small chest which must contain the very thing they had been seeking. Without thinking Sparrow surged forward from the bed, and grabbed it by one of the thin iron handles at it’s side. “JACK!” The bed dislodged from the wall, moving hurriedly towards the opening as Barbossa got his arms around Sparrow’s hips and flung him back as with all his strength, sending them both rolling from the bed and across the slanting floorboards, landing nearer to the cabin doors.

“Are you mad?!”

“We need the chalices!” Jack shouted back. As the rest of the room seemed sucked towards it’s destruction, Barbossa saw his crutch skittering across the floor. Jack secured in one arm, he reached for it and used it to anchor them to the door frame as the entire center of the cabin floor cracked and gave way to the decks below.

Jack yelled and held tightly to Barbossa with one arm, while the other clutched the weighty chest containing their prize as he dangled on the edge of the new gaping hole that had opened beneath them. Through the splintered wood, he could see the jagged rocks of the beach far below, and watched as furniture, bits of deck and bones plummeted down to be shattered upon them. The added weight on the old pirate, who alone kept them from plummeting to their death, caused him to groan in agony.

“Hold tight, love! I’ll get us out of this!”

“You had damn well better!”

The ship shifted violently again, sliding down the crag of the rocks. Jack swung the chest again and used it to pull himself onto safe ground once more, relieving Barbossa of his burden. Helping the old pirate to his feet, they darted through the door, the ship heaving back and forth as it slid down the jagged sides of the cliff that had held it safely for two hundred years. The Santiago gave a fearful tip forward, turning nose down. Jack and Hector were flung against the railing of the upper deck as gravity threatened to flip them both out into space.

Sparrow saw it in a split second out of the corner of his eye. Sliding downward, he noticed a narrow alcove within the cliff side the must have once been home to some great bird, for it's nest had long been abandoned. It was the only chance. "Hector, there!"

"Aye, I see it!"

"JUMP!"

Throwing the chest into the rocks first, both pirates made a frantic, desperate leap for safety. Jack, smaller and leaner cleared the opening easily. Barbossa, hindered by his leg, managed only to catch the ledge. Jack turned and dragged Hector safely into the protective alcove of rock, just as the entire Santiago rushed past them in a roar of splintering wood and went crashing to the beach far below.

The din of the crash lasted for several long minutes, shattering the quiet jungle air. It could be heard up to fifteen miles away, and not even the roar of the ocean before them could drown out the sound. As the dust cleared, Jack looked up blinking, Hector wrapped safely in his arms, though he seemed stunned. "Hector! Hector!"

The older pirate was slow to come around, but when he did he cuffed Sparrow hard across the top of the head, making him shout and wince, rubbing the sore spot. "Idiot!"

"We're alive aren't we? And we have the chalices!" Jack reminded him, hoping that this victory would lessen the man's sour mood. Hector propped himself up against the rocks, his shoulder throbbing from the exertion. Jack settled comfortably beside him, the chest in his lap and tipped back the lid.

Inside however, was nothing but two hefty rocks, which had replaced what the chest had originally contained. The two men gawked at it for a moment, hardly able to believe they had nearly killed themselves for a pair of useless stones. "The Spanish." Hector said knowingly. Jack nodded, "They're ahead of us, mate."

Barbossa shook his head tiredly, slumping against the rock. "And we're that much further behind. I'm getting too old for this, Jack."

Sparrow settled comfortably against him for a moment, laying his head on the older man's chest. "You and me both, luv." They sat silently in each others company for a time, each glad the other was safe and sound. Then Hector sat up rigidly, eyes wide. "Oh no...Groves!"

"Who?"

Barbossa scrambled to stand, having to crouch, which was made all the more difficult for his peg leg and tried to negotiate a way down the rocky ledges to the ground below. "You old bat! You can't make it down that way alone!" Sparrow was quick to provide him a much needed helping hand, the two inching their way down the narrowest precipices. When they finally reached the bottom twenty minutes later, Hector could see the wreckage of the Santiago scattered for at least a hundred yards or more along the beach. He had a growing knot of fear in his stomach that the young officer had been crushed by it.

"I don't see him," he said fearfully, looking around wildly. Before Jack could repeat his previous question he was cracked across the back of the head by a large piece of broken wood that sent him

face forward into the sand. Barbossa, having lost his balance, whirled and found himself caught by another strong pair of arms that made to drag him off. “Quickly sir! Before he comes to!”

To his surprise, Hector found himself being dragged away by none other than the missing Lieutenant, who looked a bit dusty and flustered, but quite sound. “Put me down ya damn fool! That was Jack Sparrow you just brained!”

Theodore blinked slowly, realization dawning on him. “Oh...Oh!”

Sparrow groaned from the sand, clutching the back of his ringing skull. “Bloody fuck!!”

The two naval men bent beside him in the sand, trying to help him stand. “I’m so sorry!” Groves mumbled, “I thought...with the wreckage and all, that the Admiral was being attacked. I assumed you were some other pirate or one of the Spanish...” His face turned red at his egregious error that had almost split Jack’s head wide. Hector shook his head; he supposed Jack deserved as much for nearly getting the other man crushed beneath the falling ship.

Jack stood, swayed dangerously upon his feet for a minute or two, then finally gained his balance, still holding his buzzing hill. “Oy! Unhand my Hector, you...you scoundrels you!”

“‘Your Hector’?” Groves repeated, suddenly feeling deeply possessive. Hector was more concerned with Jack’s unwarranted use of plurals. “How many of us do ye see, Jack?”

“Four of course!” Sparrow replied loftily, eyes rolling before slumping heavily to one side. He was caught by an unexpected pair of hands as Joshamee Gibbs came barreling up the beach. “Jack!” Grappling with Sparrow, he looked hurriedly to the others as several other officers came running down the beach behind him. “We saw the whole bloody thing come down in timbers! We thought you were both killed!”

“Very nearly, but no such luck today, Mr. Gibbs.” Barbossa muttered as they helped right Sparrow, who seemed to be shaking off the effects of the blow at last. “You people really need to stop doing that! My poor brain basket can not take any more damage,” he muttered painfully. He took stock of Gibbs then, who smiled sheepishly at him. “Powerful glad I am to see ya Captain, and in one piece!”

Jack gave him a dubious stare, “Mighty fine of you to say, Gibbs, you drunken scoundrel.” He shook his hand and yanked him forward, flicking him hard across the nose, making the man yelp and wince. “You stole my map.”

Gibbs winced a little, “Aye, but with good reason, sir! And it proved useful, did it not?” He grinned, but Jack’s face did not soften. “I do regret it, sir. It’s been a hard life since we lost the Pearl...I forgot whom my friends were.”

Jack clapped him upon the back heartily and then move protectively back to Barbossa, taking his arm. “Come Hector, luv. We should be going, someone will have likely heard that and come to see what the trouble is.” He started to pull Barbossa forward, only to have Groves tug them to a stop. “Oh Captain Sparrow, don’t trouble yourself! I can see to the Admiral well enough on my own.” He took Barbossa’s other arm and looked at him fondly. Jack smiled falsely, “Oh no, no, no. I’m sure Hector would be much more comfortable with me. You’re too tall for him.”

“I’m afraid I must insist.”

“As must I.”

Hector found himself uncomfortably and incredibly in the middle of a tug of war between the two sailors. Gibbs and the others stared, unable to look away as two very handsome and eligible men fought over one greying withered, peg-legged salt crusted pirate.

“Enough!” Barbossa finally barked. “We’ve no time for petty squabblin’! Since both of ye damn near killed each other not to mention myself, ye can have the privilege of carrying the weapons. And you Mr. Gibbs will be leading us to camp.”

“But Hector,” Jack pouted.

“Surely you don’t mean–!” Groves chimed in. Barbossa snapped at both of them and hobbled off again, nudging Gibbs in front of him to get the line moving once more, leaving Jack and Theodore standing uncomfortably next to each other.

“Powder-faced git.”

“Rum soaked twat.”

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Chapter 8

The lingering summer sunset allowed them to cover ten more miles before dark over took them. In the whole of that time, the mixed company of pirates and British loyalist continued to conflict with one another.

Jack, carrying upon his back several heavy muskets, while Groves was laden with musket rounds and gunpowder, found endless ways to pick at each other in their growing state of agitation. “All those bags of lead aren’t weighing you down, are they?” Jack muttered. His companion leered at him beneath the low brim of his tattered trio-corner hat. “I can manage fine, thank you.” he said stiffly. Jack shifted the weight upon his back and muttered; “This is all your fault.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Beg all you like, you’ll not get it.” The pirate retorted sharply. “Explain to me, sir, what business you have with so called Admiral Barbossa? You’re playing a bit out of your league, aren’t you? Reaching a bit far?”

“Class and station matter little to me, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“I was talking about, ‘experience’, mate. Conquests. I mean look at you,” he gestured towards the taller leaner man, who still remained polished and poised even though his uniform had begun to tatter and tear and his wig looked a frightful white birds nest seated somewhat crookedly upon his head. “You might have bedded a few prissy ladies of the court in your time. But men don’t seem to be your forte. Especially stalwart, feral, sea worthy men like Barbossa, eh?”

Groves stood a little taller, “Your perceptions are limited, Captain Sparrow. The Admiral may have had his wild days in the past, but now he is a man of honor, loyalty, and refinement.”

Jack’s mouth struggled to contain a giggle and a grin, then finally lost as he blurted out a snorting cackle of laughter, almost stumbling. “You’re joking!”

“He is every bit the gentlemen I have come to respect...and care for.”

This jolted Jack back to attention and he looked sharply. “ As in...feelings?” he asked suspiciously, standing a bit closer to the man, leering up into his face with those dark intense eyes, slanted in suspicion. “Yes.” Groves said briskly. “I feel a great deal for the Admiral.”

For a moment Jack looked troubled, even a bit dejected, then firmed up once more, grinning slyly. “You may feel for him, mate. But you haven’t known him as I have. Our story goes back over two lifetimes, literally. That bristly old sod up there stole my heart when I was little more than a cabin boy on my father’s ship. Damned if he’s ever let go of it, either.” He smiled fondly towards the man at the head of their expedition, though Hector, limping and grumbling as he was, was not exactly a picture of romantic beauty just then. Groves tried to absorb this information, looking as unimpressed as possible. “I’ve known him, in every possible sense of the word. Have you ever

‘known’ anyone in such a way, Thompson.”

“It’s Theodore. Lieutenant Groves to you.”

“Well, Graves? Answer the question.”

“It’s–! Oh never mind!” He tried to outdistance Jack, but Sparrow was right on his heels. “I take it that means no then, eh?”

Finally the officer turned on him. “A gentlemen does not speak public about his relations.”

“So he hasn’t fucked you then?”

Grove’s tan and sunburnt skin went yet a shade darker. “Of all the crude, disgusting–!”

Jack turned and walked away, feeling rather smug and satisfied. “There then. All bravado, just as I figured.” But the officer caught up to him quickly, ignoring the curious glances from behind by the other soldiers and sailors. “As a matter of fact he has!”

Sparrow pivoted, staring him in the face. “Liar.”

“Am I?” He threw down the supplies, pulled away the collar of his shirt, revealing rather fresh love bites. Jack seemed stunned, stepping up close and leaning in to get a better look. Groves tensed at the awkward and somewhat uncomfortable proximity of the other man. It was somewhat intimidating to be this close to a legendary force such as Jack Sparrow, but right now he wasn’t concerned with that. When the swarthy, dark haired man seemed satisfied with this proof he turned and started hurriedly towards the front of the line.

Barbossa and Gibbs were at the forefront of the pack, slashing their way through the jungle thicket. All the fighting with unruly vines and ferns and ground cover that stood taller that his chest was truly beginning to wear on both men.

“I don’t understand it,” the First Mate replied gruffly, face hard red and beaded with sweat from the labor and the heat and humidity, which even at this late hour had not yet subsided. “And what be that, Mr. Gibbs?”

“Well, Jack’s a charming, dashing, romantic rouge,” he began, then blushed a little and added, “from what I’ve observed,” and then went on; “I can see why anyone might fancy him. He certainly has left a string of broken hearts behind him in his journeys. And Lt. Groves is young, good-looking, eligible chap of good standing. So he would also make a fine suitor for any woman...or, like minded man.” He looked to Barbossa then, “But for the life of me, I can not figure out why the two are back there bickering like a couple of lusty handmaidens over the likes of you.”

Hector chuckled smugly, “Perhaps you’d have to get to know me more personally to understand, Mr. Gibbs. Be that something your considering?”

Gibbs fell to sputtering at the very idea, and the Admiral enjoyed watching his brain twist itself into a fine knot at the very notion. “Struck dumb with envy are ya?” Hector had no more than cleared another foot or two in front of him and was about to replace his saber in his belt when Jack was suddenly staring him in the face. “You bastard!”

“Something the matter?” he asked casually.

“You lectured me for how long on so called ‘casual philandering’, and yet the moment I’m out of your sight, you have the nerve to go bedding that up-tight little twat?!”

“Now you’ve stepped in it,” Gibbs nodded knowingly. Hector rubbed his forehead tiredly, shooing him off. “Don’t get your knickers in a twist, I can explain–!”

“What? That you’re a bloody hypocrite?”

“Jack–!”

“Hypocrite!”

He grabbed him by the front of his waistcoat and shook him. “Ye’ve no right to be jealous! How many men and women have ye had in my absence, eh? What of Bill Turner, not to mention his son? If we be speaking about transgressions, then you must put down all yer cards, Jack.”

“We’ve settled all that.”

“Aye, we have.” They breathed heavily for a moment, then Barbossa seemed confused, “So then what be vexing you?”

“Baring the issues with the Turners, I have never... ‘felt’ for anyone else. It was all physical. But that doily-laced little sod claims that you and he...” He couldn’t quite bring himself to say it. “That there are ‘feelings’ involved, as it were.”

“Did he now?” Barbossa cast a look back down the line of stalled men, seeing Groves trying to make his way to the front of it. He felt a bit impressed, for though he knew they man was infatuated with him, even concerned for his welfare as he had recently and frequently demonstrated, he did not know how deep the attraction went.

“Sir! Sir, I must apologize!” He cried, shoving his way towards them. “But that rapscallion–!”

“Don’t use words you don’t understand,” Jack hissed back, folding his arms haughtily across his chest. Theodore bristled and made as if to draw his sword.

“How dare you insult my intelligence you drunken, ignorant, illegitimate–!”

“ENOUGH!” Hector gave them both a shove aside, throwing down his sword between the two of them as if to draw a literal line in the sand. He pointed to Jack; “Sparrow, I’ll not hear another complaint from you, or you’ll be in irons and suitably gagged for the remainder of the journey!” As Groves smiled superiorly at the chastised pirate, Barbossa whirled on him. “And you! I expect this kind of petty behavior from him, but I can’t believe that you keep encouraging him!” Groves blanched then looked at his feet, ashamed at his conduct and still steaming at Jack. “My apologizes, Hector. It was not my place.”

“Don’t you call him ‘Hector’!” Jack shouted, starting towards the other man, but Gibbs held him back. “You don’t deserve to use that name!”

Hector took his hat from his head and began beating both of them with it. “Stop it! I’ll hear no more out of either of you!” He turned away exhaustedly, “We’ll make camp here. This old stump of mine needs a good night’s rest.” It did seem to pain him considerably then, and Jack put a worried hand upon his shoulder. “Sit down then, will you? No one wants to hear you complain.” But he smiled fondly at the other man and kissed his temple.

The Admiral put his hand over the other man's, feeling the familiar texture of his rings, particularly the one around his thumb. "If ye be so concerned for my health, kindly stow yer bickering and help the Lieutenant and the others clear the area so that we can bunk down for the evening. We'll be needing drinking water and firewood as well."

"But...I'm Captain. I don't 'fetch fire wood'." Jack said indignantly.

"Admiral," Barbossa reminded him, "outranks Captain."

"Bastard."

"Off with ye."

Jack grumbled bitterly as he waded his way down into the passing stream, filling canteens and buckets from the clear water. More times than he could count on this journey he had been subject to labors and chores that he hadn't stooped to in years. At least not for other people. His sour mood was only worsened by a new lingering back ache, since their harrowing escape from the Santiago had reopened old wounds there, a growing lethargy, and a kind of dull, smoldering resentment for the man who called himself Theodore Groves.

He had half a mind to march right back into that camp and unleash a tidal wave of grievance upon Barbossa, who hadn't the faintest clue what he had been through since their last meeting in London, and demand that he cut all ties with the stuff-shirt. He had just about made up his mind on the matter, when he spotted the very man off to his right, digging through some bushes.

"Lost something?" the pirate called snidely to him. Theodore ignored him and continued his search. It was this doggedness that finally got the better of Jack's ever present curiosity and caused him to wade over to the man. "What's so interesting?"

The officer looked back at him in irritation. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Yes. Doesn't answer my question though."

Groves sighed deeply and shook his head, too tired to keep up the argument. "If you must know, I'm looking for a particular herb, said to help manage pain." He kept combing through the under growth, looking for his prize. "When our ship was taken down, I'm afraid the Admiral lost any medicinal drugs that were given to him by the physician. I can't stand to see him in pain."

Jack was little surprised by this kindness, and remained silent for a moment, much to Groves' surprise. "What? No sarcasm?"

"It's worse than he lets on, isn't it?" the pirate asked then, all pretense of opposition fading behind his concern. The officer was surprised, and nodded. "He bears it all in silence. I recall when he first came to London, a shipwrecked refuge, one of the many pirates that were granted clemency from the King. It was widely believed he wouldn't survive the week. But he surprised us all." Jack nodded thoughtfully, "That's Barbossa for you."

“What did you mean when you mentioned ‘The Turners’? You mean William Turner, don’t you? The blacksmith who ran away with Ms. Swann?” The man next to him shifted uncomfortably. “That was a private conversation.”

“Before the entire crew?” Groves wiped some of the sweat from his forehead. “From what I gathered, you have often been unfaithful in your relationship with the Admiral.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed again. “Whatever small, fleeting attentions he has so unwisely chosen to bestow upon you, Teddy, hardly affords you the right to speak on my love for the man.”

“Love?”

His dark eyes were a little bit startled at this expression, and even Jack looked momentarily pensive, for he did not use the term lightly. But if ever there was such a thing as love, he had it for Hector Barbossa. Groves looked away again, mulling the idea over in his head. It was then he came upon the plant and cut a few long stems and tucked them into his satchel. “Haven’t you water to fetch?” he asked gruffly.

Jack turned back towards the river’s edge, and knelt once more to finish filling the buckets and canteens. The officer would have left him in peace, but felt a hot spike of jealousy, even resentment welling up inside his chest. It didn’t seem fair that Jack could just walk in and out of Barbossa’s life whenever he pleased, giving no one else a chance. Perhaps it was this kind of dysfunctional relationship that had given the Admiral the idea that he could be with more than one man at a time. He glared back at the man at the water’s edge until he felt like he could burn a hole in his back with his searing gaze. Then, letting his petty jealousy get the better of him, Groves did something all together unprofessional. He crept up behind Jack, listening to the man grumble beneath his breath, then kicked him straight into the stream.

The pirate came up sputtering and spitting, thoroughly drenched. “You mealy mouthed yesty little cod piece!” he sputtered, wet dreads hanging in his eyes. As Groves laughed at the ridiculous sight he posed, Sparrow waded towards the bank, grabbed the satchel and flung the other man in with him. “Blackguard!” Groves sputtered, drawing his sword. Jack did like wise, grinning expectantly,“Pirate!”

The two engaged in a duel, swords clanging above the din of rushing, splashing water, lunging and retreating again and again. “You can’t possibly hope to hold his affections!” Jack shouted, narrowly missing a thrust that would have penetrated his shoulder and rendered it useless. He took a wide swipe at Groves, which made the taller man duck. His wig was swept from his head and lost to the water below. “You know nothing about him!”

He charged and the officer was able to hold off his blade, locking them together momentarily, “I know a side of him that you’ll never see! I see the man he could have been, would have been, has become since he left pirating!”

“What makes you think he’s left it?” Groves shouted then and heaved him backwards, and Jack went splashing down upon his back once more. Floundering, the pirate struggled to get back to his feet, but Theodore’s sword was at his throat. “You are at my mercy, Captain Sparrow. Do you yield?”

“Never.” Jack grinned, kicking his foot out and catching Groves at the ankles sending him sprawling off the side with another great splash. Jack raced to the bank, grabbed the fallen satchel and began to run, only to be tackled painfully into the ground by his foe. “Get off me!”

“Not until you unhand that satchel!”

“Fine!” Sparrow flung it into his face, which caused the man to roll off him, panting hard and looking confused. “There. Happy now?” He turned and started off towards the camp again, leaving the water behind for Groves to carry. He seemed perplexed that the other man had given up so abruptly after such a fierce battle. But, he argued, perhaps even thick-headed scoundrels like Jack Sparrow knew when they were in the wrong. He opened the satchel flap to make sure that the delicate stems he had cut were unharmed in the tussle, only to find them gone. “SPARROW!”

Gibbs eased his aching back against a sturdy log as they huddled around one of the camps small fires, watching a kettle boil over the smoking flames. Their food would be sparse, naught but a lot of stale moldy biscuits and watered down soup to eat. It might have been different if they’d been able to catch a bird or a deer perhaps, but the crash from earlier seemed to have scared them all away. Gillette, still nervously guarded Barbossa’s coveted jar of poisoned frogs, sat tiredly across him. “You were once an honorable servant of his majesties Navy, weren’t you Mr. Gibbs?” the younger man began without preamble.

The old sailor squinted at him in the firelight. “Aye...I was. That feels like a hundred years ago. I was a sight younger, a bit trimmer, but no richer.” He nodded. “What of it?”

“Then perhaps you can help me understand. What is it that makes a man forsake all vows of loyalty to his country and turn pirate?” He glared indiscriminately out into the darkness, thinking of his former friend. “First Norrington, then Beckett...now Theodore. It’s as if it’s some sort of sickness spreading amongst our ranks. You would think that fear of the noose alone would make them think twice...but still they go. What is the lure of it all?”

“Well, Gillette, near as I can figure, it’s the simple dream every man has, especially men of the sea. That wish to be his own master and make his own way in life. Serving beneath the crown can be at times...unrewarding. Daunting. Going off to wars that few understand, dying for a man who neither knows nor cares about your name nor the family you’re leaving behind. Is it any wonder men seek freedom on the open water?”

“I suppose.” Gillette replied. He spotted Barbossa in the distance and his mood soured further. “He may be Admiral in title, but he’ll never be more than a blackguard and cut throat to me. I can never forgive him, turning Groves to that sordid life of knavery and drunkeness and...sodomy.” He shuddered at the last bit, and then looked seriously at Gibbs again. “I don’t think I would have been as taken by surprise, you understand, if he had fallen for Jack Sparrow. I suppose, in his own way, he’s a rather...androgynous, appealing rouge that might charm a man out of his sensibilities.”

Gibbs chuckled a little into his tin cup, “Aye, you’ve no idea.”

“But Barbossa! I mean...even Sparrow is obviously infatuated with the beast.” The older sailor leaned in, speaking a bit more freely between the two of them. “Barbossa’s a mysterious figure, ye see. No one really knows where he came from, but from what I’ve been told, he was brought up in the pirating way in the South China Sea under the pirate lord Sao Jiong. He sailed the world before he was neigh twenty. That is to say he must have acquired a few peculiar talents in all that time...”

Gillette shivered a little at the unsavory nature of this conversation, but couldn’t deny his curosity.

“That may be, but...how could he keep his interest? I mean the man must be fifty, perhaps more! If ever he possessed looks, they are faded now. And even talents become old and predictable.”

Gibbs leaned a little closer, almost whispering now. “Do you think he’s...you know...?” He made a lewd gesture with his hands, as if trying to figure on exactly how much girth and length Barbossa must be working with. It was only then that they became aware of third party to their private conversation; one Jack Sparrow. The gawked at him as he looked on in interest. “Oh yeah. You have no idea, mates. Huge.” He grinned at their shock and stepped lithely between the two.

“Jack! I weren’t–!”

But before Gibbs could explain himself, there came a sort of primal roar from behind them, and Jack whirled, wide-eyed, just in time to see Groves charge at him like a ragging bull. “Oh buggar! That scrawny little devil’s fast–!”

The other man knocked him past Gillette, over a log and sent them both rolling down the embankment, Groves trying to tear Jack’s head from his shoulders. “You scoundrel! You wicked, thieving little monkey!”

Gibbs chased after them hurriedly, his growing gut bouncing a little as he negotiated his way down the slope and managed to tear the two apart. “Alright! Alright! Come along, both of you!”

“Put me down Gibbs!” Jack snarled, clawing at his hand as he frog marched him towards Barbossa’s tent. “That’s an order!”

“Sorry to disobey sir, but it’s for your own good!”

“You back stabber!”

He brought the two squirming sailors to the tent, keeping them seperated as best he could. Inside, by the light of the lanterns, they could see Barbossa, looking tired, pained and irritated. “What is it?”

“Sorry to disturb, sir,” Gibbs said, trying to keep Jack from throttling him in the process, “But I found these two trying to kill each other. I figured ye may want to be dealing with the issue yerself.”

The red haired pirate shakily got to his feet and marched towards them, and both pirate and officer stopped struggling, not liking the dark look upon his face. “That be all that I can stand out of you. You’re dismissed, Mr. Gibbs.”

The First Mate gratefully retreated. Groves opened his mouth to speak, but Hector held up a hand to silence him. “I’ll not hear a word of excuse! Yer grown men, rolling around in the dirt like children!” He looked at their damp, muddy forms and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “If I had a bit more strength in these old bones just now, I’d lay both of ye out. But as it is–,” He grabbed both men and forced them against each other before shoving them both down upon the floor. Heads knocking together, both winced and whined. “Now! You’ll stay there, just like that, until I return. And if I hear so much as a sneeze from the two of ye, I swear to God I’ll beat ye both with this wooden leg of mine!” And before they could offer another word of protest, he was gone, hobbling his way out towards the campfires.

Jack shoved Groves off him the moment the tent flap fell, but did not get off the ground, leaning back on his hands and letting his head dip back behind his shoulders as he groaned, “There’s just no livin’ with that man sometimes.”

“Yes,” Groves muttered, dusting off his jacket and straightening his waistcoat. “He does have a frightful temper, doesn’t he?”

“Heaven help you if you ever find yourself on the wrong side of it.” Jack chuckled ruefully. A moment of awkward silence passed before Groves finally spoke again; “So then...do we kill each other, or learn to behave civilly?”

“I vote for killing.”

“I’m being rather serious.” the officer muttered, frowning at him. “Though your insincerity doesn’t surprise me. You think life is one big game, don’t you?” Sparrow didn’t acknowledge him, staring at the tent ceiling as if trying to look through it the sky above. “Do you ever consider anyone’s feelings but your own?”

“Why should I?”

“Out of common decency, for one.” He looked at the floor, muscles aching from their scuffle and finding himself woefully damp and chilled. “Aren’t you the least bit concerned about what he wants?” he asked then sheepishly, keeping his eyes firmly upon the dirt floor and refusing to look at Sparrow. Jack scoffed, but his face fell a little. “Well, obviously he sees something in you. Or he would never attempt a stunt like this.” he admitted, drawing little pictures in the dirt with his finger tip. “And it was rather thoughtful of you, even kind I suppose, to go looking for those herbs. I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

Groves smiled a little at this acknowledgment, and seemed for the first time really look at the other pirate. Jack didn’t look exactly the same as he had upon their very first meeting all those years ago when he had washed up in Port Royal and proceeded to evoke chaos. But the shades of time were subtle upon the pirate, who still appeared young, handsome and brash. Jack could surely have any man that he wanted; why then was he so fiercely possessive of Barbossa, a man who easily had ten or more years on him. Then again, Theodore could ask himself the same question.

“Forgive me, but...” he began slowly, still not wanting to meet Jack’s eyes. “You were serious when you claimed to love him, weren’t you?”

“Never a more profound truth have I ever spoken in my life, darlin’.” Jack answered honestly and without hesitation. He stood up then, wandered over to chest that Barbossa had stowed in the cabin and sought out what he knew he would find; a bottle of rum.

“I thought I burned all that.” Groves chuckled incredulously.

“Never underestimate a man and his drink.” Jack noted wisely, sitting back down neatly in front of him, pulling the cork out with his teeth and taking a deep swig of the caramel colored concoction before offering it to Groves, who took it dubiously. “Won’t he notice?”

“Think of it as a peace offering. We want to do what’s right by Hector, don’t we?” Groves, not wanting to appear unsporting, took a drink as well, feeling the warmth of it rush through his body, creating almost at once a light tingling at the base of his skull. “So...” Jack began again after each of them had another two swigs of rum each and the bottle was nearly half way empty. “I’m

interested to know...what is it you see in Barbossa? That is to say, I knew the man when he was fiery haired, lean built, smug-lipped youth. But you, you're starting off with...well...you know."

"You don't find him physically attractive anymore?"

"Of course I do! I just...don't know why anyone else would. I mean, he's not the friendliest of chaps, is he? Has a personality like a stray dog, and he's abrasive on his best of days."

"Perhaps he is a little...gruff." Groves conceded, his guard lowered and his eyes drooping a little in the blissful calm of pre-drunkenness. "But I find it invigorating to see a man who knows what he wants and just...takes it." He flushed a little, thinking back to their rough love making in the jungle. It did not go unnoticed by his unlikely companion, who now leaned a bit closer. "Ah, there we have it then. Attracted to authority, are you? Prowess, cunning. He's a Pirate Lord in his own right, you know. And that's no easy title to be won." Groves grinned warmly into the mouth of the bottle. "I believe you." He looked shyly at the other man, who was now gazing at him in interest, a little smirk in the corner of his lips beneath the edge of his dark facial hair. "Is it, if I may ask, always like that?"

"Like wot?"

Groves fumbled, for this type of conversation was a bit out of his range. "Oh damn, what are the words...raw? Savagely mindless?"

Jack's grin grew a little. "Interesting adjectives. But no...not always. He can be surprisingly tender when he wants to be. Sweet, I dare to say, though he'd kill me for it." He drank deeply, feeling blissfully drunk but not out of his wits yet. "He's a surprisingly artful lover."

"Really?"

"Not much on the foreplay though." Jack leaned in dangerously close then, his cheek brushing along the other mans to whisper in his ear. "That's always been my forte."

Groves shuddered and emitted a small, lustful sigh in spite of himself. Jack turned and stole a kiss from the other man's lips, feeling him relax into it, before pulling away. "I think...I'm beginning to see where he's going with this whole 'get along' thing." He spoke, speech slightly slurred.

"Yes," the officer gasped back. "Me too." He discarded the bottle and lunged at the pirate, knocking him flat to the floor and lying on top of him, devouring his mouth, in a sloppy, heated kiss. Jack found the turn about amusing, and let it go on for a minute or two, feeling the young and vivaciously lustful officer have his fun before cleverly threading his arms around the man and rolling him over to lay on top of him instead, pinning him as he nibbled his ear. "No point in asking you if you've ever done this before, eh?" he grinned. Groves in turn tilted his head, caught Jack in another amorous kiss before nipping sharply at his throat. "I'm certainly learning."

They fumbled out of their damp muddy shirts and jackets, still keeping a bit of pretense between them by leaving their pants on as they groped and kissed by lantern light under the shade of the tent, listening to the sounds of camp and the jungle beyond. Both had become so engrossed in the act of exploring each other's mouths that they didn't even hear the thump of Barbossa's footsteps as he made his way back into the tent.

The aging pirate paused stiffly for a moment, looking on in surprise at the sight that greeted him, then rolled his eyes and smiled ruefully before settling himself down upon a cot to watch the other

two. It was strange watching both of his lovers together, and for a moment he questioned whether or not this plan was ill-conceived or not. Jack looked up then, having discovered the new pair of eyes watching them and smiled, completely unashamed. Groves made a small noise of embarrassment at being caught in such a compromising position, but Hector only smiled at the two of them. “Buried the hatchet, I see.” He noticed the discarded rum bottle upon the floor and kicked it with the tip of his toe. “I was saving that.”

“I can’t think of a more fitting occasion than this, can you, Teddy?” the tan skinned pirate asked loftily, looking at the man beside him. Groves found himself nuzzling into Jack’s hair, playing with the assortment of beads and bones and other odd trinkets twisted within the dark locks. “No, Captain, I can’t.”

Hector chuckled softly at their current sordid state and spread a blanket out upon the floor for them all to bed down on, before removing his awkward and cumbersome wooden appendage and sat it aside. His faithful officer crawled into his lap, eagerly engaging the older man in a kiss, seeking the comfort of this new, yet familiar relationship and his approval. Jack crawled up behind him, kissing at the man’s long neck and moving down his shoulders and letting his tongue play along the artful curve of his spine. Groves whimpered into Hector’s mouth, clutching him close, hands working to get the other man out of his waist coat and shirt.

Jack was curling around the man, trying to lick and kiss every inch of exposed torso, until he moved dangerously low to hip line and caused the youngest man to jump. “Ah! Not there!”

The two pirates looked up curiously. “Something wrong?”

He looked from one to the other, amazed when neither seemed to realize what had startled him. “It’s just...I mean...you can’t be suggesting putting your mouth there.” Jack tilted his head as he looked deviously up at Barbossa. “Oh, Hector-luv, our little officer has not experienced that most devious and delicious pleasure of oral satisfaction, now has he?”

“Seems that way.”

“And you two have?” Groves immediately regretted it the moment he spoke and put his face in his hand. “What am I saying, of course you have.”

Hector turned him around so that his back was to him and he was nestled against his shoulder as Jack spread himself out comfortably and started kissing up the man’s leg as he removed his shoes and leggings. “Wait just a minute now, gentlemen! I never agreed to...oh that tickles!...Jack, no!”

“Shh,” Hector cooed, kissing his neck and behind his ear and down to his shoulders and back as he kept him from squirming away. “Don’t fight it, luv. Jack knows what he’s doing.” he reached a hand around to comb it through the top of Jack’s dark hair, bringing him up briefly for a kiss. “His sharp tongue is good for more than sly double-talk.”

“Thank you, darling.”

While Jack took his time working his way up the officer’s trembling legs and thighs, Hector worked on the upper half, keeping the nervous young man preoccupied with kisses, caresses and sharp love bites. Theodore felt as if the temperature inside the tent was twice the humidity of the thick air outside, and it was almost too hard to breathe. This was not the stuff of even his lustiest dreams, and he could barely believe that it was actually happening. A small part of him feared that he might be nothing more than a plaything for the two savvy and notorious pirate lords, but it was

drowned out by his certainty of Hector's affections, and the charming smile of Jack's. By the time Jack had worked his way towards the prize, he was not entirely sure Groves wouldn't explode on contact. So he approached very cautiously, first with his fingers, then with his lips, then with the tip of his tongue.

Hector could feel his most recent lover's heart thundering against his rib cage as he clutched him, gasping and mewling softly in an effort to contain screams just bubbling below the surface. He was enjoying watching the two men like this, and being a part of it without being lost to it. Not to say that he wasn't feeling the affects himself. "Oh...oh God...God, Jack, your mouth...! Ah, Hector, kiss me!"

Barbossa obliged, capturing his gasping lips in a rough kiss as Jack picked up speed, Hector's hand still on top of his head, lightly guiding his movement. Jack's fingers spread themselves across the quivering skin of Grove's lower abdomen, feeling the muscles tighten as he neared climax. Sparrow pressed his advantage, and pulled back just as the other man yelped, spilling across his hand and quivering thighs. Jack sat back, wiping his mouth and feeling satisfied with the look of complete bliss on Theodore's flushed face.

Quivering in Hector's arms, Theodore felt a bone-deep sort of lethargy come over him in the wake of such release, and he slumped heavily into his lover's embrace. "Are ye still breathin', luv?"

"Mmmm?" Groves asked dreamily. "Yes, I'm...just so tired now." He kissed Barbossa before leaning forward and giving Jack a kiss of gratitude as well before slumping down upon the blanket and falling immediately asleep. Barbossa folded his coat and tucked it beneath his head to serve as pillow and kissed his cheek fondly goodnight.

Sparrow picked up the discarded bottle and took another gulp and settled back against Barbossa as they looked at the other man. "Well, aren't you going to gloat about how well your little scheme worked?" he asked. Hector gave him a little smile in reply, but his gaze seemed fixated on Jack's naked torso and all the markings upon it. He looked worriedly to the red and still angry looking wounds upon his back and the horrid etching upon his chest. But instead of feeling anger this time, he felt remorse and sorrow. "I'm sorry."

"For what, luv?"

Hector pulled him close, laying his forehead against Jack's. "You never left my mind, believe that. If I had known what you'd endured–!" Jack put his finger to his lips to shush him, looking at him seriously, dark eyes bright in the lantern light. "It's doesn't matter now." He leaned in and kissed the other man softly, surprised when felt dampness on Barbossa's cheeks. He pulled the older man down upon the blanket with him, wrapping themselves around each other in an effort to get as close as possible. For the first time since he had entered that God forsaken pub in London, Jack felt safe and complete. As long as he was here, and Barbossa was in arms reach, he felt he wasn't walking alone. Blackbeard, Angelica, and all the wickedness and suffering he'd endured seemed very far away now. The flame in the lantern was flickering, leaving them with little light, but neither needed it. They had long since memorized the lines of each other's faces, the shapes of hands and shoulders. Every curve, every nook, every scar. "I'm here now," Barbossa mumbled against the smooth curve of Jack's forearm as he kissed along it, "And now that I have ye again, I won't be letting you go from my sight."

Jack helped him out of his breeches, the Admiral providing a like-wise service for the pirate until they were both lying naked together in the dark. Jack couldn't help but admire how strong Hector had remained through everything, not just physically, but mentally, perhaps even spiritually. That

kind of strength was something to be admired, maybe even worshiped. He felt the cool metal of Hector's pendant brush along his skin as it dangled from his neck and used it to pull the other man down again into a heated kiss. "I love you."

Barbossa didn't reply with words, and instead held the other man more tightly, kissing the bruised skin around one of his neck wounds lightly as he hand worked down Jack's smooth, firm torso to find it's way between his legs. Sighing, Jack obliged the other man as well, missing he feel of him. They sighed and whimpered in the dark, needing to say little. It was there, everything they had always been too proud or too stubborn to admit to one another, but was true none the less. Jack's hips were grinding hungrily against Hector's, signaling clearly that he wanted more. Barbossa lifted his hips, workings his fingers around the smooth skin of his backside and stretching him. Sparrow whimpered and sighed in the dark, running his hands down the broad expanse of Barbossa's strong back, feeling the old scars there. "Hector, please..."

He held the man's face between his palms, kissing him as he pushed into him. Jack hissed slightly at the roughness of the entry, but was used to such treatment, and even preferred it at times. Hector's face showed an expression of longing that made him appear ten years younger then, for his eyes held that same soft warmth they had when they were young. He knew, that whatever would happen with Groves, that Jack would always hold the highest spot in his heart.

The pace was slow and unhurried. It wasn't often their love making was like this, so both took care to relish every little quiver and breath, every brush of skin against skin and every muttered oath. Barbossa seemed to be working to undo all the scars that Blackbeard had left on him, to wipe the slate clean again. "You're mine," he breathed against Sparrow's cheek, driving hard into him now to bring them both over the edge. Jack clutched him tightly, one hand knotted into Hector's long, loose hair, the other digging into his shoulder. "Yes...!"

"In this life, and the next...mine!" He grunted loudly, feeling himself teetering. Jack was pushing back against him, legs wrapped around his back. "Hector...Hector, I'm...!"

"Nnnn-aah! Jack!"

They collapsed together in the dark, neither moving at all for a time, breathing heavily and feeling satisfied and achingly sore. Hector lifted his head briefly to check on Groves, who had slept through the whole thing, utterly exhausted, then nestled down again, forehead to forehead with Sparrow. "Ye think anyone will have heard that?" he chuckled.

"Who cares?" Sparrow replied, stroking his beard fondly. The red head caught a glimpse of the piece of sea glass that Jack had braided into his hair and twisted it between his fingers. "This is new." Sparrow smiled fondly at the reminder, then thought of Shandy and the others, still in Blackbeard's snare. For a moment he looked far away, pensive, maybe even a little frightened. Hector held him a bit closer. "Something wrong?"

"No. Just unsettled business."

"Plenty of time for that in the morning." Hector replied, eyes drooping. "We'll begin at first light."

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Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

*Blackbeard's at it again, you know the drill.

A few hours slipped by in relative silence as darkness fell heavily around them, with nothing to disturb the nocturnal noises of the jungle save for a few sleepy conversations spoken around dwindling camp fires. Groves woke unbidden from a hazy dream and found himself just as he had fallen upon the floor of the tent. He rolled over, spotting Jack and Barbossa side by side on the ground, also asleep. It was an odd scene to the man, who was still fumbling to find his place in this complex and unconventional relationship. He noted how contented both men looked together, and wondered if Hector had ever felt so peaceful at his side.

Insecurities aside, Groves rose, adjusted his clothing and crawled out from under the tent flap into the edge of their camp clearing, needing to shake off some of the grogginess of drink and sex from his mind, not to mention relieve his achingly full bladder. It was in doing so that he noticed a strange, unnatural movement at the edge of the tree line. Nervously he froze, watching shadows pass between the foliage and trees, knowing that whatever was moving was too big and too deliberate to be a stalking animal. He hesitated for a moment, then moved a bit closer, letting his eyes adjust in the dark. Crouching at the edge of a palm fern, he found himself looking down an incline to a path below, where a group of men were marching unhurriedly along the trail. Spanish officers, cloaked in their rusty brown jackets with gold stitching, marched along unaware of him. They spoke quietly and jovially in their native tongue, and Groves understood that they had no idea that just above them, their enemy laid asleep.

Adrenaline rushed through him, making him quiver a little. He didn't dare move, or even breathe too loudly, afraid to alert them to his presence. When they had gone a little further down the path, he crept back towards the tent and darted inside.

"Admiral! Admiral!" he gasped, reaching for Barbossa and shaking his shoulder. Hector came awake, staring up at him in the dark. "What is–?" Theodore shushed him hurriedly, and he saw from the anxious expression upon the man's face that something was wrong. Jack woke too, squinting at the two of them. "If you two are going to go at it, at least let me lie over there. I'm still tired," he mumbled, his mind clearly not caught up with the situation at hand. Barbossa pressed a hand over his mouth to quiet him, and when it had been made clear that silence must be obtained, they followed him out into the brush.

Laying on their stomachs in the dirt, Barbossa, Sparrow, and Groves observed as the Spanish guards made their way down to their own camp sight at the foot of the little valley. They must have been there the entire time, hidden behind the giant coconut laden palms surrounding them. "Looks as if this grove is not as empty as previously assumed," Jack mumbled. The Admiral rolled his eyes, "We're damned fortunate. They must be twice our number now, if not more. If they had stumbled upon us in the dark they could have murdered us all in our sleep." Groves shivered at the idea.

Jack looked at the two men lying on either side of him then, a realization dawning upon him. “Bleak though our precarious situation may be, my darlings, rest assured, there is a golden opportunity presented. For why else would our so called competition be lying in wait so close to what was formerly the remains of the Santiago, eh?”

“The Chalices.”

“Aye. No doubt tucked safely away somewhere there in. Ripe for the taking.”

Barbossa looked at him in the dark. “Aye. But how is it ye suggest we make our way in there without being discovered?” The two pirates looked at each other in the dark for a moment, then looked to Groves. “Oh no,” the officer muttered. “I don’t want to be a diversion!”

A half formed plan is better than no plan at all. At least, that had always been Jack Sparrow’s philosophy. The three mariners moved in as close to the enemy camp as they dared, armed with swords and pistols, and Groves with a flare gun. The young officer thought the plan was reckless and needlessly dangerous, but could see little alternative. After all, even with all their numbers, they could not truly hope to outfight the Spanish forces. Stealth and subterfuge was their only remaining option, something both Jack and Hector knew and understood better than anyone.

“Now,” Barbossa spoke quickly and quietly, looking him in the eye to make sure he understood every word. “Remain here, and wait for the signal. Should we come to trouble, you’ll be back up that hill and fetch the others. The chalices must be retrieved at all costs.”

Theodore nodded in understanding, but he wasn’t about to sacrifice Hector for some tarnished vessels of profane ritual. He reached and grasped the Admiral’s hand, much to his surprise, “Sir, I–,” But as much as he felt them, the words wouldn’t come. Hector offered him a smile and quick peck on the lips. “Remember the signal.” he nodded, moving down the incline once more. Stammering, Groves stood behind as Jack made to follow. “Yes, remember the signal.” He agreed before leaning in a greedily smooching the other man until he felt Barbossa tugging on his coat tails. “Come on!”

With the two of them creeping off along the undergrowth, the officer set his jaw, took a deep breath and fired towards the skyline. With a thunder crack and puff of white smoke, the flare exploded from the barrel, screeching up into the sky, showering sparks down upon the tree tops. The sound and sudden light, made the loitering army ahead of them sit up and take notice.

Crouched in wait, the two pirates watched as the men before them scattered in a flurry of tense curiosity. Jack spotted it first; a grand tent that surely belonged to the commander of these invaders, and where in the chalices must surely be hidden. The crawled on knees and elbows, inching along the ground like snakes. Hector held his sword out before him as he crawled, and Jack could not help but take notice of the fact that it had an odd odor. “Your sword smells funny.”

“Do you recall asking me about my sudden interest in frogs?”

It seemed slightly off topic, but Jack nodded. “This blade’s been swathed with the guts of a poisonous breed, sure to kill a man in minutes.” His eyes darkened as Jack’s widened. “Then please point it away from me.” Apparently Hector was becoming even more eccentric in his old

age. “I mean it for the man that took my leg.” Barbossa answered, and Jack nodded silently.

They lurked behind the tent flap, peering through the gap in the fabric to see that the leader of the expedition had remained. Hector recognized him immediately as the man he’d encountered in battle who had nearly blown him to bits. “Damn,” he muttered. “Seems they’re more resilient than I gave credit for.”

“Doesn’t look like much to me,” Jack whispered, shrugging his shoulders. Then his eyes caught something reflecting in the lantern light. There they were; the two chalices of Ponce de Leon. They weren’t much to look at, they appeared to be simple brass and pewter, fringed with what looked like pearl. There was an inscription upon each, but Jack could not make it out. Unfortunately, they were sitting upon the table that the Spaniard himself was occupying, pouring over an old book and maps. Before his companion could speak, Sparrow was slinking his way across the floor, unnoticed, and crawling beneath the Spaniard’s table. Hector’s eyes boggled nervously, but was forced to follow suit. How many years had it been, and he was still letting Jack drag him into these half-brained schemes? Something never change.

Sparrow peeked up over the edge of the table, just a hair out of the other man’s line of vision, staring at the cup. On the other side, Barbossa was doing much the same. He gave the table a little shake, causing the Spaniard’s ink well to tip. As the unwitting man reached to right it, Jack snatched the cup closet to him and sank beneath the table again. Hector held his breath. This time, Jack gave his end a little shake, causing several heavy ledgers to shift. Perplexed, the Spaniard reached to right these as well, allowing Barbossa to grab the other chalice. But then a hand caught his, gave it a brutal squeeze and tore from him from beneath the table, sending books and maps falling everywhere.

Hector attempted to slash the man with his sword, but was kicked flat upon the ground, a boot heel grinding down upon his hand painfully and holding him there as a rapier tip scrapped his throat. “Knave! Coward! How dare you! Identify yourself!”

The cornered pirate grinned nervously up at his attacker. “Admiral Hector Barbossa, at your service.” The dark haired man’s eyes widened as the face before him became familiar. “You!” he snarled, accent thick and menacing even in it’s musicality. “Loathsome British dog! You insult my name, set fire to my ship, and destroyed my best hat.” He pushed the tip of his sword a little harder against Barbossa’s skin, creating a small pin-prick of blood. “Now you attempt to steal the chalices. For this, I will have your head!”

He felt a sudden jerk from behind as a pair of arms came around his neck and chest and he found another sword at his own throat. “You don’t want to be doing that, mate.” Jack hissed to his startled captive. “You cut him, I cut you.”

Beaten, the man known less formerly as Captain Adalvino Sanchez, threw down his sword as Jack smiled and Hector attempted to right himself. “You are clever, senor,” he growled. “But not clever enough. Officers!”

There was a cascade of pistol hammers being drawn back, muskets being hurriedly loaded and the smell of gunpowder in the humid air. The two pirates looked around to find themselves utterly surrounded on all sides. Seems that the Spanish forces could spare a few men to go chasing distractions, while others staid behind to guard their prize.

“Parlay?”

Sparrow mused briefly upon the idea that, if his fortunes had been different, and he had been born and raised in a more upstanding household, if he might have traded a life of piracy for that of politics. He was always very good at talking in circles, getting his own way, and articulating every little detail in a way that sounded perfectly on the level, while actually twisting it all about to his favor. He found himself once again in this situation, as he paced the floor of the Captain's tent, Hector bound and held at gun point not seven feet away, and Captain Sanchez watching him with growing interest.

"Very generous of you to consider my offer." Jack spoke, admiring the other captain's trappings surrounding his tent. His host watched him with an eagle eye, though he did not seem to look upon Sparrow as an immediate threat. If it were so, he would have had more men stationed around the tent, instead of just the one who was guarding Barbossa.

"So you are the pirate that fat English pig has hired to lead his expedition," the spoke thoughtfully, shaking his head, dark hair falling over his shoulder. "They are desperate." he chuckled, smoothing the corners of his dark mustache. "I must admit, when my men and I heard the crash a few hours ago, we had assumed the English had met their end trying to retrieve what we had already taken. I did not expect you to come sneaking up on us like snakes in the grass, though that is exactly what you are."

Jack paused; "Actually, that is the pirate the fat English pig hired," he corrected, pointing to Barbossa, who rolled his eyes. "I'm just an innocent pirate brought here against my will, and under no fault of my own have been dragged into this ill-conceived quest to find a fountain what can not be found." He toyed with the Spaniard's ordinary compass, "Shame, really."

"Then you owe no loyalty to the British monarchy?"

"Heavens no." He stuck out his tongue in distaste. "England, I have nothing against. But the King...eh...he's a bit soft for my tastes. Too many cream puffs, not enough meat, savvy?"

Captain Sanchez turned his dark gaze upon Hector again, "Then why should I spare your companion?" He lazily cocked and pointed his pistol at Barbossa's head, as if he meant to shoot. Jack reached and pushed the barrel of the thing down quickly; "Because I need him-!" he corrected himself quickly then by amending; "That is, 'we' need him."

"We?"

"Well, I'm assuming that now that you've captured me, the illustrious Captain Jack Sparrow, you'll be wanting my services as a guide? Which I'd be ever so happy to oblige you with, however, if word were to get back to the British that their pirate died and I lived, it would leave me in a bit of trouble. Savvy?" The opposing Captain lifted himself elegantly from his chair, plucking from the table a curious ledger that looked worn and possibly hundreds of years old, it's brittle and yellowed pages crackling a bit under the pressure of the man's palm, and waved it at Sparrow. "Why, Captain Sparrow, would I need you to guide me, when I have this?" He held it a bit closer for Jack to see, "The journal of Ponce de Leon himself. In these ancient pages lies every minute detail of how to reach the Fountain."

Jack looked from the book to Barbossa, “I suppose we don’t have one of those, do we?”

Barbossa looked at him dully in reply; “No, we don’t.”

Sparrow grinned back at Sanchez, “Spoils to the winner then, I suppose.” He reached for the book and the man placed it carefully behind him on the table again, putting himself between it and Sparrow’s reaching fingers.

Quickly, Jack tried to come up with another bartering chip. “Alright then, maybe you don’t need a guide. But do you know how to perform the ritual once you get there?”

“I do not need to know.” Sanchez replied matter of factly, he and Sparrow following each other around in circles in the tent, in a strange almost elusive sort of dance. But this last statement perplexed the pirate and he turned; “Why not?”

“The Fountain is sacrilege. Against the will of God. It is by the order of my Lord King Ferdinand, that I find it and destroy it.”

Jack gawked. “Destroy it? But, immortality mate! How can you pass that up? Your King could rule for a hundred years, two hundred, perhaps even a thousand!”

“And his soul would be damned.”

“Oh right, the soul thing...” Jack muttered. “Of course, I know how very precious a soul is, as I lost mine once, but through good fortune I managed to reclaim it.” Hector cleared his throat loudly and Jack smiled sheepishly. “Well, perhaps I had a little assistance.”

The Spaniard was looking impatient and weary. “You have not yet given me sound reason to spare your life, Captain Sparrow. Why do I need you?” But the more he looked at Jack, the more he knew his mind was made up. The journey had been long, and his need for companionship had been growing of late. Somehow all this hot humid air had only made it worse. And Jack was looking more enticing the more he grasped at straws.

“Are you aware sir, that at this very moment another pirate, much more criminal than myself, is on his way to claim the very prize you seek?” he inquired then, wondering if the Spainards were even aware of Blackbeard and his intentions. Captain Sanchez scoffed; “Why would I care about a loathsome band of pirates such as yourself? I’ve a force of over two hundred men here, Captain Sparrow. We are more than a match for any scheme your cut throat companions might conjure.”

“Not just any pirate, mate.” Jack said gravely, voice low, leaning close to the man as he put a hand upon his shoulder as if to impress upon him the seriousness of the statement. “Blackbeard himself. He means to take the Fountain, drink from it’s life giving water, and with immortality secured, conquer the sea and all that sails upon her. Is your King Ferdinand ready to deal with that?”

The Spaniard looked troubled, and Jack knew he had an in. “Worse than the British, eh?”

“Not by much.” Sanchez muttered.

“But I know how you can defeat the blackguard, destroy the Fountain, AND return with a nice little surprise for your jolly king pretty boy as well. You see, should you reach the Fountain first and accomplish all that you achieve, you still will not be able to return to Spain. Whitecap Bay is now besieged by angry Mermaids, incensed by Blackbeard’s evil doings. Any man who sets foot in those waters will be torn limb from limb.”

Jack waited for the Spaniard to question him on the manner of mer people, but he did not, for he

must have seen signs of them in the water even at their own early arrival. “But you can escape that terrible fate, by returning to them what Blackbeard stole; the Sword of Triton.”

“The what?”

“The sword is fabled to have the power to move the immovable. To make inanimate things bend to your will. It’s a powerful gift, my hot blooded friend. Something your King might fancy? With it he could command the tide itself.”

This did seem to spark the other Captain’s interest, and Hector watched silently from his guarded place upon the ground, hoping that Jack would not foul things up. A smile spread across Captain Sanchez’s tan, mustached features, the like of a tiger about to pounce upon it’s prey; “You’re a very smart man, Captain Sparrow.” he began, looking Jack over with those dark penetrating eyes. “It would be a shame for you to die needlessly with this pig.” Jack nodded vigorously, feeling suddenly as if he was being backed into a corner. A feeling he was always familiar with, though loathed entirely. “I’m sure we can come to some arrangement.” He stroked his hand down Jack’s arm, and Sparrow stared. “Wait...hold on,” he carefully extracted himself from the other man’s grip, ducking beneath him and inching nervously away. “Are you suggesting...?”

The Spaniard looked at him coyly. “Don’t think me crude, Captain Sparrow,” the amended, quickly, while keeping his voice sultry, enticing. “I am a man of great power, great wealth. I could make your hard, dishonest life a comfortable one, living in the lap of luxury. In return for your...affections.”

“Said lap belonging to you, eh?” Jack joked, though his laughter was thin and nervous. The man snatched his hand and kissed it, making both Sparrow and Barbossa cringe. “You may call me Aldavino.” He began kissing up the man’s wrist and arm, but the Caribbean pirate shook him off and crept a little closer to Hector, wiping his hand on his waistcoat. “Aldie, darling, you’re very...tempting, but...surely his majesty would object?”

“King Ferdinand?”

“Aye! That one. From what I’ve heard around the docks, you and he have a...ah...how do you say?... a ‘close personal relationship’. And with all that hot, passionate, Spanish blood, surely there would be some jealous feelings aroused from such a tryst?” Even as Jack tried to talk his way out of a very unscrupulous deal, he could see in the other man’s lust dark eyes that he had already made up his mind; “I wouldn’t want to be the one to come between the two of you.”

The Spaniard seized him, wrapping his arms around the slighter man and tipping him backwards precariously over the desk. “The King does not have to know.”

“Oh buggar...!” He flinched as the man leaned in to kiss him, but was halted by Barbossa’s sudden outburst; “Get your hands off him ye bloody inbred son of a bitch!” Both men turned their heads to look at him, one looking confused, one looking pleased. “Hold your tongue, blackguard, or I will cut it out!”

“Come over here and say it to me face, ye scurvy mongrel!”

Captain Sanchez looked to Sparrow again, his face somewhat perplexed. “Such outrage, yet you claim you have no loyalties to him.” He frowned at Jack. “Are you spoken for by this wrinkled, withering bastard?”

Jack shrugged jovially. “You have me between a rock and a hard place, Mr. ‘Ez.” He squirmed, as that “hard place” was pressing up against his hip uncomfortably. Before Sanchez could speak further however, Jack had climbed upon the table, rolled across it and snatched the ancient ledger before the other man could catch him. Kicking the table over to hinder the other man’s interference, he grabbed a lantern from it’s perch, smashed the glass and held the book over the open flame. “No!” Sanchez cried, eyes huge and round.

“Seems I have the upper hand now, savvy?”

He let the flickering flame consume the edges, watching as it was swiftly devoured. Sanchez drew his pistol and raised it, meaning to shoot Sparrow, the crewman guarding Barbossa doing the same. “Pull that trigger and you’re only means of reaching the Fountain are lost!”

Hector stared frantically from one man to the other, knowing he was powerless to do anything while still bound. He ground his teeth nervously, hoping that Jack’s impulsive actions wouldn’t cost them both their lives. While Aldavino seemed to be considering his choices, the other crewman made a surprising and bold move, sneaking up behind Sparrow and clouting him on the back of the head with his gun. Both pirate and book fell to the ground, and the other captain moved hurriedly to put out the flames. But the damage had been done. “Jack!”

Turning through the ashen and charred remains of the ledger, The Spaniard seethed. “Take them out to the grove and bind them! We’ll see how an evening alone in the wilderness treats them.”

“Should we not execute them, sir?” the crewman asked curiously, but the other man shook his head. “No, that would be too swift an end. I have been tempted,” he glared darkly at Jack, who was painfully rubbing his head and whimpering. “And now they will be punished as God designs.”

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From his hidden vantage point, Groves watched with growing anxiety as both Barbossa and Jack were dragged from the camp out towards the coconut grove beyond. “Oh no!” He tensed, ready to charge in to the rescue, then remembered Barbossa’s instructions. Torn between a sense of duty and the overriding urge to protect the man he loved, he faltered. He looked back up the hill to where their camp lay in wait. By the time he fetched Gibbs and the others for reenforcements, Hector and Jack could already be dead. But charging ahead might very well get all three of them killed, and the others massacred. Finally, his heart won over his head, and he moved forward along the tree line, staying close to the ground as he watched the Admiral and the Captain be dragged to grove of palms surrounding the camp. Both were tied to the opposite trunks, and just when Groves thought the crewmen would pull their weapons and fire, they abruptly abandoned the men alone in the dark.

Crouched and breathing shallowly, he watched the Spanish crew as they made their way back towards camp, and heard the ranting of their superior officer. Through the trees, he caught a glimpse of the man who had nearly claimed Barbossa’s life aboard The Endeavor and felt a hot

surge of hate in his stomach. With Barbossa and Jack momentarily out of harms way; Groves decided to engage in a little piracy of his own.

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Barbossa waited until he heard the last sounds of footsteps fading away before turning to his companion in misfortune. “Are ye alright?”

“Well enough, all things considered.” Jack sighed, resting his aching head against the rough bark of the tree. “A lot of help you were back there.” The other man scoffed loudly and kicked at him in response; “As I recall, it was your brilliant idea to go crawling in there like a couple of half-wits in the first place!”

“Well, I didn’t hear any suggestions from you.”

“Because ye never listen!”

Jack smiled fondly at him, which seemed to only further confound and agitate the other man. “What the hell are ya grinning at me for?”

“I missed you.”

“How’s that?”

“This, I mean...the two of us. Off on an adventure, two scoundrels against the world, living by our wits and having nothing but each other. It’s just...nice, I suppose.” Hector softened a little at the statement, smiling ruefully. “Aye. I suppose, I missed you too.”

They stared out into the dark for moment, wondering if the sound of the nearby camp alone would be enough to keep anything hungry and lurking at bay, and how long it would be until Groves returned with help, if he returned at all. “Another fine mess,” Barbossa sighed. “I’m getting too old for this, Jack.”

“Oh, you’re not old. Just...crusty.”

The bearded man chuckled, inched his right knee up towards his chest and began to fiddle with his peg leg. Jack looked up hopefully. “Oh, you’ve got a knife in there don’t you?”

“Better.”

The darker skinned pirate watched in fascination as Hector unscrewed the lower half of the peg to reveal it hollow and containing rum. Jack’s eyes widened. “I want some.”

Hector passed it over, and Jack drank, forgetting the oddity of it. Still, the obviousness of it was there, and Jack felt it was time he knew the nature of Barbossa’s malady. “How did you really loose the Pearl, Hector?”

Barbossa’s face fell into sad lines. Considering Jack had returned his pendant to him, he knew that

he must have spoke with the missionary, and knew the story he had given the king had been false. “She wasn’t lost. She was taken.” he began gravely. “On a dark night, off the coast of Hispaniola just as I told you. There came a signs of a passing ship off the port bow, the great treasure galleon The Queen Anne, as you well know...”

Nearly eight months at sea had put Barbossa in a strangely melancholy and wistful mood. Without the Mao Kun map, he had been forced to find other means of finding the coveted Fountain of Youth. For months they had sailed the open waters of the Caspian Sea all the way to the Atlantic, following rumors and hunting down anyone that could give them details on it’s location. The Fountain had been sought after for centuries, and while it’s location seemed up for debate, also the nature of it’s power, one common thread remained; to search for the Fountain of Youth was to hunt for your own death. Many a brave captain and his crew had been lost on the journey, others who claimed to have discovered it, were broken, spiritless men, haunted by the things they had seen in the jungles and caves.

And through all this searching, Hector had kept an eye on the horizon, expecting that any day now they would come upon a ship with a notorious man aboard; the man he’d left behind. Now, eight months later, and no sign of Jack, he was beginning to regret letting his temper and jealousy get the better of him once more.

The night had been black as pitch, with no moon and hardly a star to navigate by. And eerie fog had fallen over the water, and they were still miles from shore. Hector stood at the wheel, tiredly watching the black surf as it rolled along beneath the haul, rocking them steadily. Beside him had stood Pintel and Ragetti, his ever present crewmen, who were on about putting into port again soon.

“What say you, Captain?” Pintel, his yellow teeth showing even in the dim lantern light. “The crew is becoming a bit disheartened, weary as it were. I’m sure a night or two in port would put their spirits right again, eh?”

His partner in every sense, Ragetti nodded vigorously, his shaggy head of blonde hair flopping in the sea in the sea breeze; “Even better, we might find another clue what could lead us to the Fountain.”

Hector stared at the gangly man, eyes lingering on the patch over his empty socket where once a wooden eye had sat; Barbossa’s very own Piece of Eight, declaring him a member of the Brethern Court and a Pirate Lord. “We left port not two weeks ago, gentlemen, and ye want me to waste yet more time by doing so again? This not be a pleasure cruise.”

“Well,” Ragetti began again, a bit more contritely this time; “Maybe we’ll find Captain Jack there.”

“We sure could use that ol’ compass of his.” Pintel nodded.

The mention of Jack made Hector’s mood worsen, for he was pinning for the other man, more than he’d like to let on. “Maybe, if you were to ask real sweet like, he’d give back the map he stole from you. Though he’ll probably be wanting his ship back...” Barbossa fixed him with a deadly stare and he withered a little. “Just a suggestion.”

“These be Spanish waters, you fools. There’s not a port here that’s safe to our kind. We’ve spent too many years plundering off their wealth for them to welcome us with open arms.”

“Ship off the port bow!”

The three men looked up at the cry that echoed from the crow’s nest above, squinting into the dark and the fog. Sure enough, she came into view. Fierce and terrible looking, glow from what looked like several huge lanterns fixed at both bow and stern; the galleon approached in the dark. Hector gripped the wheel, immediately feeling the thrill of nervousness in his stomach. How could anything so big have snuck up on them?

“Can anyone see her flag?”

“No sir! Fog’s too thick!”

Barbossa made to the rail, Wee Jack, his monkey nervously skittering down from the rat lines and clinging to his shoulder. The creature was whimpering and chittering, trying to huddle into his coat. He was afraid. Hector pulled his spy glass and peered through the lense, trying to catch a glimpse of the ship’s colors. He spotted it with little trouble, for the thing was moving closer still. A black flag with a devil’s skull, breathing fire.

“Blackbeard!”

No sooner had utter this oath than there was the destructive thunder of canon fire and the firey flash of an explosion. The ship rocked hard into the swell, wood splintered and men screamed. The forward sail came down in a fiery tatter of canvas. “Hard to Starboard, bring her around broad side! Canons at the ready! I want crushed glass and nails, anything sharp and rusty you can find! No one fires on my ship and lives to tell the tale!”

The men scattered to their captain’s bidding, unknowing what trouble yet lay before them. Hector heard screams coming from the forward bow, followed by another, and another, but he could not see why. Something moved above them in the dark, and to his great surprise and complete terror, he saw the rigging of the Black Pearl, twisting and curling, reaching down like snakes and snatching up her crew, hoisting them into the air and snaring them their in a web of rope and canvas.

“Bloody hell! The ship’s cursed!” Pintel shouted.

“Twice cursed!” Ragetti chimed in.

“Stand your ground you fools! Cut yourselves down! Fire on that ship!”

But none could obey. Hector gawked, seeing men hanging all around him, screeching for help, some dead and some alive, for some had been strung like by their throats. He grabbed the wheel and turned her hard, trying now to move out of range of the Queen Anne’s heavy guns, for the Black Pearl would stand no chance against a second assault. “Do I have to do everything myself?!”

But he had no sooner turned her rudder than ropes snaked themselves around his wrists, waist and legs, flinging him up into the air. Hector bellowed as Wee Jack scrambled for safety. Cursing madly, he managed to pull his sword from his belt and began hacking at the bewitched lines that held him. He freed his arms and waist, and was suddenly lurched downward. He collided painfully with the deck below, his right leg still tangled in the cursed lines.

For a moment he was stunned into senselessness, and when he lifted his head again a moment later, his leg sang with pain and he knew that it must have been broken in the fall. Still, he had retained his sword, and made now to cut himself free, when he heard foot falls approaching him. Slowly looking, Barbossa found himself staring up into the dark and fearsome visage of the fabled pirate of legend; Blackbeard himself.

Many were his crimes, remorseless was his manner, and merciless was his code. He stared down at the captive at his feet with dark, unfeeling eyes that seemed to glow in the firelight of his ship's lanterns. Or maybe the flames of Hell itself. "Who is captain among you?" he asked.

"I am." Hector snarled. "And woe be to you, firing upon my ship without warrant! Have ye no sense of the Code, Blackbeard? I am Captain Hector Barbossa, Pirate Lord of the Caspian sea. This unwarranted attack against one of the Brethren–!"

"I do not abide by the Brethern and their Code, Captain Barbossa." he muttered, obviously unconcerned. Hector gulped quietly, knowing now the real danger he, his crew and ship were in. A rouge pirate, unbound by the Code was more dangerous than any man of the king's navy. "Is this not The Black Pearl?" he demanded.

"Aye, it is."

"Then where is Jack Sparrow? I understood that he was captain of the fabled Black Pearl."

Hector felt cold. "He's been relieved of that command."

"Search the brig." The other pirate commanded, and Hector watched in astoundment as Blackbeard's crew, lurched forward. They were not human; at least not entirely. They smelled of foul, rotting flesh and sun bleached marrow. They were moving, obeying, but not alive. Corpses that moved as puppets on strings. There was evil here that could not be spoken, and he was beginning to see that all the rumors paled in the face of the truth. "He is not aboard this ship!" Hector barked after them, wincing at the twisting pain in his leg and the rope that was still squeezing it.

Blackbeard looked back at him, displeased. "That is unfortunate for you." He waved the sword at his side, a strange and fearsome looking thing, at the rigging above, and at least seven of his men were dropped to the deck and shattered upon it. Through the screams and crunching of bones, Barbossa bellowed for reprieve. The dark haired pirate, his famous beard smoldering with cinders from slowly burning braids woven into it, looked down at him and laughed; "You cry for mercy, Captain Barbossa! But I have none to give. I present to you instead a choice; join my crew or die." He turned then towards the freshly dead crew members and gave his strange sword another wave. To Hector's disbelief, the broken bodies shuddered, twitched and slowly brought themselves to a standing position. "I need not living volunteers, you see. So consider this the very best advice you will ever receive; do not resist me."

Barbossa stared back at him, teeth bared. "Do not be proud, Captain. It is an easy decision."

"Aye. It is."

Hector steeled his grip around his sword handle, turned and with a great angry swipe hacked into his own useless limb. He screamed as he severed bone and muscle, and in two more painful thrusts he was threw. The bewitched rope swung away, taking his severed limb with it. Still screaming, sick with pain, the pirate captain reached into his jacket, pulled his pistol and fired on the man in

front of him. The shot went high and wide, catching Blackbeard in the shoulder. He stumbled backwards by the blow, eyes wide. He pulled his hand away from the smoking hole in his jacket, and Hector saw to his amazement that it did not even bleed. Still it seemed to pain him, for the other man was muttering hurriedly under his breath, some strangely familiar tongue that he couldn't quite discern.

Bleeding profusely, Barbossa managed to crawl to the rail, making to reach for another fallen pistol, as his had been neglected and lacked any more shots. Before he could reach it, the other captain stormed towards him, grabbed Hector by the lapels of his coat and hoisted him to the rail; "Bold. But stupid."

Without another word he flung the wounded man over the side, into the dark water below.

Jack paled a little, realizing that Blackbeard must have been searching for him for sometime, and that this was possibly the entire reason he had decided to attack the Black Pearl in the first place. Hector fixed Jack with a desperate, harrowed look, squeezing his amputated limb. "I am master of my own fate. NOT Blackbeard."

Sparrow's mouth fell open in a gape as his lover's story came to a close. "You...cut off your own leg?" Barbossa looked away, mouth set in a hard line. It had been the most painful thing he had ever endured in his life, and surely it had almost killed him. It was only by survival instinct Hector had managed to grab hold of a drifting powder barrel to keep himself afloat, until he was pulled to safety by young Philip Swift.

A shocked silence passed between the two pirates, and Hector could not even bring himself to look Sparrow in the eye. What he must think of him, being as proud and as spiteful as to maim himself to avoid capture. But he was not as clever as Jack at escapes, and he did not desire the idea of being turned into one of Blackbeard's hexed victims. He felt he could cry with the frustration of it all. Something ghosted across his leg then, and he looked up in shock to find that it was Jack, who had freed himself from the rope bindings. Before he could question the man's escape, Sparrow had crawled into his lap and kissed him lovingly. Barbossa felt tears on the other man's face as he kissed him, and managed to put his hands on Jack's thighs, since he was still bound. When the other man pulled back, he asked; "You must think me a mad old fool for such an act."

"You're braver than I ever could be." Was all Jack said before kissing him again. Hector didn't protest, uncertain he had ever felt this close to the other man. He almost forgot everything else, until he felt Jack leaning a bit more into him and cleverly undoing the buttons of his trousers. "What are you doing?' he hissed as the other man turned his head and nibbled on his neck. "Taking advantage of your vulnerable state." the younger pirate chuckled.

"Jack, now not be the time."

"If there's anything I've learned from you, darlin', it's that you may never know which time is your last." He slid his hand between the older man's thighs and earned a little sigh from him in response as he kissed his neck and ear, finding that Hector had retained his gold earning, which was fabled to keep a sailor from drowning. "At least untie me," the other man protested, breathing heavily for Jack's hands were already working him into a frenzied state of arousal, heightened by the fear of being discovered. He felt the man grin against his skin, "Why would I go doing that?

It’s not often I have you as such a captive audience.” He gave Barbossa a meaningful squeeze and licked up the column of his throat. “Ah!”

Jack nimbly slid out of his pants, letting them dangle around one ankle and keeping his boots on as he settled into Barbossa’s lap, both suppressing a little wail of bliss. Having made love so recently made the transition easier for both, and Jack wasted little time, rocking back and forth and up and down on him, keeping his mouth almost constantly attached to some part of Hector’s face and neck. He tried to wriggle free from the rope as Jack had, but found it of little use. Gasping and crying out softly in the dark, Hector resigned himself to Jack’s whims. It was the only surrender he ever enjoyed. “What’s put you in such a fine mood? Weren’t you satisfied earlier?” he sighed after a time, as Jack seemed keen to draw it all out and make it last as long as he could.

“Not about that,” Jack mumbled, groaning softly and nuzzling Barbossa’s cheek. “I just...ah!...need you, is all.”

Perhaps what he really meant was that Barbossa needed him, but he would spare the man his pride for now. Eventually they forgot the presence of the Spanish officers lingering in the camp behind them, the potential threat of the jungle beyond, and even Hector’s ever present obsession with taking revenge on Blackbeard. He managed to loosen one arm at last, which came around the back of Jack’s head and pulled him closer, kissing him hard as he gasped into his mouth.

His lover relished feeling him release, resting his head on Hector’s shoulder and keeping close to him. He wished it was this simple to remove their scars and torments, but even if it was only a brief distraction from their troubles, it was welcomed. He carefully swept his hand down Barbossa’s thigh towards the maimed stump of his knee, wanting to show him he wasn’t afraid or disgusted by it. It was just another casualty to their hard and dangerous life. Barbossa was touched by the gesture, but shrugged Jack’s hand away all the same with a twitch of his knee. “You devious little monkey.” He chuckled tiredly afterwards. “I outta box yer ears for a stunt like that.”

“You should, but you won’t.” Jack grinned, carefully extracting himself, which always left him with a sore, stretched feeling afterwards that was sometimes hard to shake off. “Speaking of monkey’s however, I have news of yours.”

Barbossa opened both eyes in interest, as he had been resting them in the wake of sex, looking both surprised and confused. “Wee Jack? I thought the little bugger drowned when the Pearl was taken?”

“If only the world were that kind, but you can hardly kill an undead thing.” Jack grumbled, as he put them both right again, carefully reattaching Barbossa’s peg leg, for hated the mangy little thing like no other. “What if I were to tell you, that the Pearl is still sailing somewhere? On even stranger tides than previously traversed?”

“I’d call ye a liar.”

“Nay, my beloved! For I have seen her with my own eyes. Under a powerful curse she is, trapped within a bottle in Blackbeard’s cabin, along with a dozen or more ill-fated vessels.” Hector had seen some weird, strange, unfathomable things in his many long years at sea, but even this felt strange to him. Then again, he was ready to believe anything these days. “And her crew?”

“Like wise captured, but alive.” He cocked his head, “Did you not see it happen?”

“I suppose I was too bad off by then. I saw her engulfed in a wave that came from nowhere, then

she was gone and only the Queen Anne remained. I thought it was all a delirium." Hector nodded thoughtfully, but those parts of his memory were spotty and dark.

The elder pirate mulled this information over thoughtfully, staring out into the dark. "What was it he wanted with you?" he asked then. Jack shrugged; "It's somewhat convoluted. Involving scorned lovers and such."

Hector stared and Jack swatted at him; "I mean the girl! Angelica!"

"The one from Seville?"

"Aye. That one."

"I told you, you'd regret that misfortune someday. Never get involved with anyone of the church. It always leads to a bad end."

"Well, it certainly has."

"And what has this vixen to do with the devil himself?"

"They're related. Sort of..."

"Even worse."

"You've no idea."

"Ye know, Sparrow, your father was a fool all those years ago to trust me with your welfare. Keeping you out of trouble is more than any one mortal man could ever hope to accomplish."

"Funny how that man keeps cropping up in conversation these days."

"Who?"

"My father." He thought back to the several mentions Blackbeard had made of him, and how he had admired that Jack had become so much like him. What was the tie that bound the two pirates together, he wondered? Surely his father had done business with devils and fiends in the past, certainly even the infamous Edward Teach must have crossed his path before. But this seemed like a more intimate tie, or why would he also know of Jack's mother?

"Jack?"

He looked up suddenly, realizing he had been off in his own head for a time. Barbossa was looking at him worriedly; "You were lost there for a second or two."

"What are the odds, do you think, of Captain Teague and Edward Teach having some strange, unsettled blood feud between them, of which the later pirate seeks to conclude with my blood in my father's stead?"

"Not likely." Hector shrugged. "Then again...you're father's a mysterious man."

Sparrow nodded, listening for the sounds of movement beyond, almost as though he expected Teach himself to come like a ghost from the woods and drag him back into the darkness with him. He gave a little shudder, and Barbossa gave him another curious look, holding him a bit closer. "There's an evil wind blowing tonight. Something foul is moving through these woods." Barbossa replied ominously. "Cant' you feel it?"

Sparrow nodded eagerly; “All the more reason for us to be making a hasty escape, don’t you think?” Hector motioned towards his bonds, still trying to free himself. Jack made to oblige, when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps and quickly darted back to his tree. Then, to Barbossa’s own bewilderment, the pirate began to actually climb up the long jagged trunk. “What in blazes...? Jack! Jack!” Hector hissed at him, cocking his head and staring up as the pirate ascended the palm just as nimbly as if he were an ape. “Don’t leave me here!”

But Jack didn’t answer, he was concentrating on whatever strange and twisted escape plan had just entered his mind. Barbossa sighed, then tensed as he heard the footsteps drawing closer. He turned his head nervously, and found himself approached by none other than Groves.

“Theodore!”

The young officer looked a bit ruffled, and there were fresh tears in his coat sleeves, and cut along his cheek. “You seem to attract trouble, sir.” he chuckled, quickly cutting Barbossa’s ties. Freed, Theodore helped him to his feet and returned his crutch, which he’d been holding. Barbossa looked at the underarm rest and noted it was scuffed, even bloodied. “Did you...beat someone with my crutch?”

“Just trying to think like a pirate,” he said quickly, sounding breathless. Hector looked at him, very impressed. “Where’s Jack?”

“Aloft.” the red haired man groaned, pointing towards the bending palm. The two of the stared curiously upward as Jack shimmed closer and closer to the tree top. “The Chalices! They’re gone!” came the distressed shout from the Spaniard somewhere beyond. Barbossa stared wide at Groves, whom produced from the satchel he’d been carrying earlier, the two items in question. “This is what we came for, isn’t it?”

Hector beamed at him, but the next moment found himself in want of a sword as their enemies swiftly approached. Luckily, that was also provided from the resourceful young man next to him. “What have you been doing all this time, lad?”

“Well, when I saw that you and Jack had been captured, I found myself in a bit of a quandary. I couldn’t just abandon you to possible death and torment, now could I?” The first of the advancing guards rushed forward through the thicket and Groves fired on him, catching him the chest. The man behind him suffered another swift end. “So while they were busy with the two of you, I snuck into the tent I saw them carry you from, assuming the chalices must be contained there in.”

“Inevitably!” Hector nodded, swinging his poisoned blade as another pair of crewmen advanced from the right, hoping to run him through, but being no match for his speed and skill. When a third man tried to sneak up from behind, Hector pulled his own pistol and shot him twice in the gut.

“So!” Groves continued animatedly, engaged in a duel with a cursing crewman before hurling him away long enough to advance properly, never moving too far from Barbossa, and still speaking; “Upon entering I met a rather unpleasant fellow, who swore at me a great deal in Spanish and tried to remove my head from my shoulders. I subdued him, hence my ragged appearance, took your stolen affects and the Chalices, and here I found myself now!” He shouted as he struck by the flat edge of sword across the shoulder and flung roughly to his knees. The man who made to run him through was treated in kind by Barbossa, receiving two deadly thrusts of his blade before being kicked aside.

“Sir, behind you!”

Hector turned and fired over his shoulder, but the sudden movement and kick of the pistol caused him to loose balance and he tumbled, but not before taking another man down with him. Groves scrambled to protect the fallen man, but knew he was quickly running out of bullets. “We’re out numbered, sir!”

They were set upon by a screaming group of crewmen, these armed with short swords, only to watch as they were thwarted from above, a shower of heavy coconuts falling from the shaking palm above, crashing down upon their skulls. Groves winced away when one man’s head was cracked wide by the falling fruit and felt the urge to vomit. While the soldiers around them scattered for cover against the surprise assault, Jack dropped down from his perch, ready, skewering them as they fled.

“Have we what we require?!” he called, helping Barbossa to his feet, who immediately swung into action again, back to back with Jack. “Aye, we do!”

“Then I say we bid a hasty retreat, eh darlings?”

“I couldn’t agree with you more!” Groves nodded, running ahead and sniping any brave and foolish man who might try to take a shot at them from the tree line as Jack and Barbossa took on any that were stupid enough to get close.

“Just like old time, eh?”

“Aye! I feel twenty years younger!”

“And one leg shorter.”

Barbossa just cackled in response, making Jack laugh through, the delirious high of adrenaline and imminent threat of death clouding his mind and making him forget how tired he was.

“Stop them! Stop them!” The familiar voice of The Spaniard rang out through the trees. They caught a glimpse of him as they rushed the hillside. “We can’t lead them back to the camp!” Barbossa called.

“I’ve taken care of it!” Groves shouted back.

They had no more than taken the hill when from it’s thick brush emerged Gibbs and Gillette, along side ten of their own loyal countryman, all armed with pistols, cocked and ready. “FIRE!” Groves shouted once the three of them were clear.

A barrage of bullets felled their perusing foes.

From the edge of his camp, shaking with outrage and growing fury, Captain Sanchez watched as pirates and Englishman made off with his prize, his finest officers slain by their weapons and dishonorable cleverness.

“Sir, your orders?” gasped one of his breathless and bleeding officers, who had taken a bullet wound to the shoulder. Aldavino looked at him without pity, his eyes cold. “Follow them, but do not engage. We will let them lead us right to it. And then, when they think they have won, we will take it from them.”

The sounds of gunfire faded eventually as they scattered further into the jungle, and soon all had gone dark and silent again. When they finally stopped to catch their breath and gather up the straggling crew, Groves looked down to see that his coat was splattered with gore. “Uhhh...!” he shuddered. “I’ve got brains on my jacket!”

“Mmm, frightfully unpleasant, that is.” Jack nodded, grimacing.

“And damn near impossible to remove the stain.” Barbossa nodded. Groves turned pale, then a shade of green and then proceeded to wretch loudly onto the ground. “No stomach for adventure, I see.” Sparrow tutted, shaking his head as his beads clacked and clanked together musically. Barbossa rolled his eyes and gave Groves a sympathetic pat on the back as he spat out the last foul taste of sickness from his mouth. “Ye did fine, lad. If it weren’t for you, I’m not sure how we would have escaped those blighters with our skins in tact.” He smiled sweetly at the younger man, who looked a bit faint. Hector eased him down on the ground as Gibbs approached. “We’ve lost them, sirs.”

Jack turned to him, “Good.” He snatched Joshamee’s faithful flask from around his neck, took a quick swig of the stuff and then handed it to Groves. “Here, have a swig of this luv, it’ll put you right.”

Gibbs gave him a forlorn look, but Sparrow waved it off. “We need to put as much distance between us and them as possible by first light. With nothing left to guide them, Mr. ‘Ez’ will be staying as close as he dares, and if he ever figures out that there are less of us than there are of them, we’re good as finished, savvy?” The older man nodded in understanding, though he looked tired and weary. Jack clapped him on the shoulder and looked at him gratefully, “I see your aim is a sharp as ever, old friend.”

The old sailor grinned and clapped him back. “Aye, sir. It’s had little rest, since I met you.” They parted and Jack went back to his lovers, both looking worn and weary. “Off again are we?” Hector asked, steadying himself on his crutch. Sparrow could see that, though the other man smiled at him, that a further journey tonight would be costly for him. Groves, recovered from his bout of squeamishness, looked pale but ready to be off again. He dug into his satchel and pulled out the two mystical goblets, looking at them in the pale summer moonlight. “Aqua de Vida,” he read the etched words upon the goblets.

“Water of Life.” Jack translated, thoughtfully. He thought of Angelica then, and her words regarding the ritual. “One gives, one takes.”

“Takes what?” Groves asked curiously.

“Years.” Hector nodded. “Something Blackbeard is out of.” he added darkly. Jack felt a shudder looking the goblets, and bid their companion to tuck them away again. He took Barbossa’s arm then and looped it over his shoulder, providing a firmer support for him as they walked, and Hector was grateful. Groves stood at his opposite arm, assured that he had not been forgotten. “So, Hector, have you told our dear Lieutenant Groves of the time when you felled a sea serpent off the coast of Japan?”

“That’s an old story.”

“Aye, but it’s always been one of my favorites.”

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But a more present danger was lying in wait closer than Jack or the others dreamed. Not more than five miles from them, another band of interlopers were making their dark and dangerous journey towards the mythic waters.

The boy, his feet throbbing and old buckled shoes torn and worn through the soles, stumbled on his weary feet. They had been walking for hours without rest. He stumbled, and finally fell face first into the soft earth. Philip heard his cry and turned, still clutching Syrena, who seemed to be sleeping. “Shandy!”

To their great surprise, Scrum was the one to bend and pick the boy up. “Here you are, lad, good as new. I’m sure we’ll be in for a good night’s rest soon.” He looked up worriedly towards Philip. “Won’t we?”

The missionary could not answer him, not fully knowing their destination. Blackbeard kept them all fitfully in the dark on all things he felt that were not necessary for them to know, to keep them fearful and subservient. If they knew of the weird and haunted place they were traveling to, some faint hearted men might try to run. This way, they knew only the safety of group or the fear of being a lone in the wild. Scrum crouched and let the exhausted Cabin boy climb upon his broad back and then started forward again. “You know, there ought to be laws against this sort of thing,” he grunted, breathing heavily. Salaman laughed; “Oh yes. Laws against cruelty against pirates.”

“Jack Sparrow thought so,” the boy mumbled then, making their heads turn. “He told me that there was a Code that was to be abided to by pirates, and any who went against it were punished by something he called ‘The Brethern Court’.”

“I thought them were just fairy tales?” Scrum said, then looked back to Syrena in the moonlight. “Then again...”

The woman in Philips arms stirred then and looked up at them all with her wide sad eyes. “You’re awake,” the man holding her responded kindly, “How are you feeling?”

It was an expression she did not fully understand, but she seemed to be aware of his weariness and motioned to be put down. Philip did so warily, watching her stand on shaky, white legs. Her knees trembled and buckled once or twice, but finally she gained balance and stood awkwardly, leaning against a bent tree for support. She seemed to catch every ray of moonlight streaming down through the trees, her white skin seeming to glow like silver. Her dark hair had glimpses of gold in it that reminded them of her previous form and it’s glittering scales. She was truly a sight to behold.

“Can I get you anything?” the young man asked gently.

“Where is Jack Sparrow?”

This request shocked the young man, and secretly his heart fell a little. Behind them Scrum scoffed; “Long gone by now, I am sure. He’s not returned as Blackbeard planned. Or maybe he’s dead.” Shandy smacked the top of his head, crushing his hat further down upon his head. “Captain

Jack is not dead! And he wouldn't abandon us!"

Scrum stood up right, letting the boy fall from his back and land hard upon his ass. "Listen you little blighter! He's a pirate! And pirates fend for themselves." He looked back at Syrena, "If I weren't in a constant terror of what that the captain would do to me, I'd be off already and take this pretty little thing with me. Sure is certain there would be many a man who would pay a fine price for a real live mermaid."

"Don't you touch her." Philip snarled, drawing the delicate young woman close to him. She looked up at him questionably as he moved her away, drawing Shandy along behind them. He lifted the tired boy upon his own back and began to walk again, keeping Syrena close and putting as many men between them and Scrum as possible, Salaman walking silently between them, amused by their squabbles.

"Your friend is small minded." the young woman said at length.

"I would not call him my friend." Philip replied. "How is it you know Jack Sparrow?"

"I have never laid eyes upon him until now. But there is a long standing promise among my sisters, to keep the oath made many years ago. Humans hunt us, kill us for our bodies. They fear and love us. It is not often a mortal bestows a kindness to mermaids. We honor this debt with an vow of protection."

"You hoped that he would save you."

"He has saved our kind before. But I do not hope." she answered quietly. "Hope is a mortal design."

He took her hand in his, "I am not Captain Sparrow, but I swear to you that I will do all I can to save you." She stared at him for a time and then reached up and touched his cheek with her soft hand. "You are different than the others."

By this time, Blackbeard and his hapless crew had reached their own destination; the Jungle Pools. It was a mysterious, lush landscape, heavy with crawling vines and vivid foliage that grew along the edges of the long, smooth slate rocks that formed a tiered hillside, in which dwelled a dozen or so deep, still pools of clear blue water. The place seemed like an oasis among the dense and dangerous equatorial forest. But there was something amiss about it's stillness, something ominous and dark. The light was growing soft on the horizon; dawn was approaching.

Blackbeard emerged onto the smooth slate rock, holding his torch aloft as he called for a halt. Weary and dazed, the company came to a stagger halt. "We have arrived." the dark clad man announced.

"At the Fountain?" Scrum asked eagerly, and was rewarded with a smack from Angelica to silence him. He pouted and rubbed his sore head. Blackbeard held his torch low towards the edge of a round still pool. In the torch light, a frightening image appeared. A skeleton, staked to the edge of the pool, grinned back at them with bleached-bone teeth and empty eyes. A second glance relieved that these were no human remains, however. Below the pelvic bone began a series of bones that looked like a second rib cage that descended down into the shallow pool. Remains of fish bones; a mermaid tail. "These are the mermaid killing fields," Blackbeard grinned at the ghastly looks upon

his crewman's faces. "Many have come before, in search of their tears to perform the ritual. Your sisters, brought to die a slow, agonizing death for greedy men." He smirked at Syrena, expecting her to react to tragedy before her. Her beautiful pale face was sorrowful, but there were no tears. Immortal things do not feel sadness as humans do, for their hearts are different. Were it any different, a tear would not be so difficult to collect, nor so precious.

Philip held her more protectively, "I will not let you harm her."

Immediately he felt the cold tip of a sword pointed at his throat, beset on both sides by Gunner and the Quartermaster. Angelica casually drew her own pistol, looking at the young missionary with eyes full of warning; "You do not have a choice, I fear."

Though Philip protested, being bodily restrained by the Quartermaster was Gunner removed Syrena from his grip, the mermaid barely seemed to register what was happening to her. Out of her element for such a long amount of time had made her dazed, weak and bleary. It was not until she was bound at the wrist, and shoved into the pool that she began to screech and writhe, her legs merging once more into a length of long, glittering scales, fanned tail thrashing violently as she bared her fangs at the zombie's, who remained unmoved by her struggle.

"Fight if you must," Blackbeard responded, staring down at her with his cold, easy smile and dark malicious eyes. "It will only speed up the process. Dawn is approaching, my dear. Soon the sun will be up in full, and you will burn in it. Escape is so close," he dipped his hand into the cool clear water, splashing at her in mockery; "But it will not help you. The water will keep you alive just long enough to make the process and slow and painful one." She glared at him with her deep eyes, deep as the fathoms themselves. "Do you not fear death?"

"All die, even you." Syrena answered bluntly. "The Fountain will not save you." She gave him a piercing stare, and for a moment Blackbeard felt himself captivated by it, leaning closer to her even knowing she could drown him. "I know what you fear. He is coming for you."

This struck at some soft, terrified place in the man's soul, and he reacted by striking her hard across the face. "Sea ghoul! Soulless little devil fish! When you are dead I will make a feast of your guts!"

"Monster!" Philip screeched from behind. Blackbeard sighed, weary of these slanderous outbursts. "Bring him here!" Philip was flung forward, restrained by the zombie and forced to his knees. Angelica stepped forward worriedly, "Father, you musn't–!"

"Silence!" he barked at her. "I will have no more of your interference on the matter." The old buccaneer glared darkly from Philip to the thrashing mermaid. "She fancies him," the wicked man grinned. "Don't you?"

Syrena made no acknowledgment of her feelings, if any she possessed, for Philip. But there was fear in her eyes as she watched the helpless man be forced to his knees. "All it will take to save his life if a few tears." The pirate coaxed, leaning close to the woman as she trashed against the stake that held her wrists and kept her from completely submerging into the pools and escaping through the subterranean tunnels beneath.

Philip looked at her fearfully, "Syrena, if you can manage a few tears, I'd be very grateful." He gaged as the leather cord of his cross necklace was tightened around his neck, threatening to strangle him. Angelica looked again to her father, pleading for the cruelty to stop, but Blackbeard ignored her, watching Syrena's face closely. Though her eyes were full of sorrow, there was not the slightest inkling of moisture upon her lashes. "No," the old man muttered, appreciatively.

“Mermaids are made of tougher stuff than that.”

He nodded to Gunner, who approached the struggling Philip and drew something from belt which flashed in the firelight. He drew it across the struggling man’s neck and the next minute he was limp and lifeless.

From behind them, Shandy cried out and made to rush forward, but Salaman took his shoulder and held firm. “Do not throw your life away for a dead man, child.” he whispered gravely. Scrum gulped, rubbing his own thick throat. “Poor blighter.”

As Gunner dragged Philip’s body away, Syrena cast her eyes down into the pool and became silent, but still she did not weep.

They made camp at the edge of the pools, and while the crew remained deeply exhausted from their grueling journey, they could find little rest in this strange and haunted place. The wind seemed to carry the dying wails of long dead mermaids, and all around them skeletons grinned at them in the pale pre-dawn light.

Angelica came to seat herself beside the pirate Captain, who sat apart from the rest of the crew as he always did. It was only to heighten their terror of him that he ever spent time in their company, and keeping himself aloft and apart from their daily lives made him all the more a mysterious and dangerous figure among them. But not to her.

“You are angry with me.” He said without looking up at her as he twisted one of the hemp-braided strands of his dark grey-black beard between his fingers. She stood over him haughtily, hand on her hip. “Do you desire to teeter upon the brink of damnation? We have not reached the Fountain yet, you are letting your temper get the better of you.”

He rolled his shoulders tiredly; “I know well that the my sands run thin, child. But I can not deny my nature.” She sighed and settled down beside him, taking his hand in concern; “Father, I have been meaning to speak with you...about what you said to the missionary before.”

“And what be that?”

“You were raving...something about a ‘her’. You spoke of this someone as a tormentor. Who is she?” She looked concerned, maybe even a little jealous of the prospect of another woman in his life. He looked at her for a time; trying to make up his mind. He did, if nothing else, trust Angelica’s faith in him completely. After all, the woman loved him, or she would not have come this far. He pulled her to him and she laid across his lap, head on his shoulder as he ran his hand up and down along her thigh. “There is an old story, my dear, about an honest sailor who fell into disrepute and denounced the crown and became a buccaneer of his own making. Now this young man was not foolish, and while he was an accomplished sailor, he was hopelessly naive in the ways of pirating.

‘One day, after many months adrift along the tides of the British Isle and the Coast of Jamaica, he came at last to a notorious port called Tortuga. The den of all free men who sail the seas. It was here he spent his last pennies on watery rum, alone and dejected. He fell to trouble, and by his own

brash stupidity, began a quarrel with some of the other patrons. It might have been where this young lad's adventure came to untimely end; until another interceded." Here Blackbeard's voice became soft, nostalgic, wistful; "The man was fearsome, dark and wild. With a head of thick black hair, braided into a wild mane beneath a bright head scarf, twisted and tangled with all manner of shiny trinkets. Crosses, I think they were. He was a fearsome Pirate Lord, who had laid claim to all the waters west of the English Channel. He staved off the fiends the foolish young sailor had provoked, and when the brawl had ceased, he lead the man aside and gave him a place to sleep for the night.

"In the morning, the young sailor expected to wake robbed and abandoned on some wretched dock. Instead, the pirate had staid to watch over him. They staid together for a short time, sailing along the coast line. These were happy days, the happiest of the young sailors life. But on the seventh day, his friend came to him with bad news. He would be leaving, returning to the woman he had taken as his bride. She was beautiful, but terrible and fierce, a warrior and pirate in her own rite. The young sailor learned that she had bewitched the Pirate Lord with her own dark art of Vodou, for the woman was actually one of the dark heathen goddesses that lead young, lustful men astray, and then forced them to pledge fidelity to them, least a curse be brought upon them and their house. The Pirate Lord was lost in her snare and the young sailor never saw him again."

When he grew quiet for a time, Angelica looked up at him again. "It is a sad story," she said slowly. "What became of the young sailor?"

"He tried to rescue his friend from the heathen's woman's curse by learning the dark and twisted arts that she herself had used against the Pirate Lord. But by then, it was too late. He was lost. And the young sailor became a bitter, twisted, frustrated old man of the sea..." She watched with concern as his face contorted with sadness and frustration. She leaned in to kiss him, wanting to take away that look of anguish, but he turned aside, removed her from himself and stood up. "Where are you going?"

"To be alone. Keep watch, see that she does not break free from those bonds." He muttered, nodding towards Syrena. She made to protest, but he was already moving away, and she sunk down upon the ground again once more, feeling angry and dejected. Scrum moved towards her, strumming his mandolin, "Frightful insensitive, isn't he?"

The pirate captain strode in listless circles around the camp, hacking bitterly at the foliage that hindered his path. Memories, dark and unobtainable, chased themselves in circles in his mind. He never gave it much credence, but in times like these, Edward Teach often wondered how he had reached this point in his life. He'd achieved fame and notoriety beyond his wildest dreams, had obtained a ship, once used as a slaver, that could not be rivaled by any other on the seven seas, and had learned an art that was likely to keep him in power for many long years to come.

But it was costing him. He was as old, and bitter as the sailor in the story he had told Angelica. His life was wasting away before him, for all the power he held, he could not stop the ravages of time, or the curse he had brought on his own soul.

"It is almost time," he spoke aloud to himself in the dark. "Soon now, very soon I will have all that

I require. And then, Teague, I will make it right. Things will be as they always should have been!" He tightly squeezed the effigy of Jack that he had drawn from inside his coat, leering down at it's painted face. "I would have preferred to have the genuine article," he muttered to it, "but time has left you old and feeble. She sucked the youth from the marrow of your very bones. Cruel fate, how it mocks me!"

He hid his face in his hand for a time, trying to calm himself. He felt dizzy with repression, sick of pushing down his growing need to be in his rightful place, free from fear of death and retaliation. He had been pining for so long, adrift in his own despair, jealousy and cowardice. And coward the fearsome Edward Teach was, for he could not even face the man he had so hoped to be with, not even after he'd murdered his wife in the dark. He calmed himself by stroking the hair of the doll in his hand, feeling the coarse strands of yarn mixed with Jack's own hair. It was thick and wild, like Teague's had been."But he is so much like you were then. Bold, abrasive, beautiful..."

In frustration he tucked the doll away again. He had to be careful now, and not overplay his hand. Too much hung in the balance and his will to see this plan through. He could not let it fall apart now because of this one petty weakness of his. A noise startled him then; for he thought he heard the sound of laughter, cackling at him from the shadows. "Damn you!" he hissed. "Mock me, will you!? Cackle all you like! It is I who will have the last laugh, Thaliacea. It is I who will take back in kind what you stole from me, Mami Wata!"

Time and fear had begun to warp his mind, and twist his perceptions. As he had fallen deeper and deeper into the darkest practices of Vodun, teaching himself the art of the bokor, he'd learned of a deity of Haitian belief that often came to man in the form of a beautiful, dark skinned woman of the ocean, for she was the bride of the sea itself; a woman known in some circles as La Sirene, and in Haiti, Mami Wata, a lesser servant of the great sea goddess Calypso. He begun to believe that Thaliacea herself had been one of this spirit's embodiment, and this was how she had lured Teague from him and made him marry her and produce their wayward son Jack Sparrow.

The shadow laughter continued and Blackbeard ran from it, even knowing he could not escape it. Her mocking, angry spirit haunted him more presently than ever. He saw her in his dreams, often felt the chill of her cold, dead breath on his neck. He had angered her spirit by daring to meddle with her kin. And though it frightened him to the depths of his black soul, he enjoyed her rage, her unrest. Soon he would be rid of her, beyond her reach. And he would take what she held most dear with him. "You can not protect him now," he muttered to the darkness. "Try though you might to thwart me, I will have him. All I have to do is call him..." He lifted the doll and began to mutter something over it; when he was startled by a sudden apparition.

In his delirium of exhaustion and terror, the pirate captain saw before him a woman, dark and wild looking, wearing the tattered, blood stained clothes of the dead. She was wet and smelled of salt and sea spray, as though she had just emerged from ocean itself. She looked at him with calm, probing eyes that seemed to have no end. No mortal could look at another man in such a manner. Coiled about her neck and shoulders was great yellow serpent, and as she walked slowly towards him, it coiled and hissed, revealing terrible fangs. "Be gone, witch!"

She laughed at him, and the light of dawn around him seemed to shrink into nothing. "Cruel coward," she muttered, her voice thick with her native accent, deep and otherworldly. "Driven mad by desire, consumed with greed. Such men all come to bad ends, Edward Teach."

He produced from his belt a simple iron-handled knife and brandished it at her, causing her to give pause. "You'll not harm me," he muttered, though he shook as he said it. "I know what you are. I destroyed your corporal form; Le Sirene, now return to the tides! You have no power here."

She stared at him, unmoved, and the sound of the ocean around them increased, though they were still miles from the coastline. She pointed at the sword sheathed in his belt; “You have taken power not given freely;” she warned. She twisted her palm and Teach felt the voodoo doll lift from his hand. It turned in thin air, twisting about on a wind that wasn’t there. “And used it against innocents.”

The spirit image of Thalecea took the doll in her own palm, cradling it gently as her serpent coiled around her body, hissing softly. “A blood debt must be repaid.” she spoke ominously, not with the familiar voice of Thaliacea, but with something older and more terrible than Blackbeard could fully imagine. He shuddered and shook, felt drained by the knife in his hand, for it thwarted his own magic, and was forced to drop it. He backed away from her, shaking his head, feeling as though she were drawing him in. He stumbled, and fell backwards into a unnoticed shallow pool.

He nearly drowned in his own panic, until he cut his hand along the sharp edge of the slate rocks. The spilling of blood seemed to dispel the spirit he precieved trying to drown him, and he managed to catch the edge of the rock and pull himself up again, gasping and sputtering. When he looked around, she was gone and the doll was sitting upon the rock, staring at him with round black painted eyes.

Quivering, harrowed by this vision, the pirate stumbled further though the under brush, until he came upon the ditch where Philip Swift lie in a state of utter senselessness. For the young missionary had not been murdered as Syrena had perceived. He had merely been struck with the same poison dart that had allowed Angelica to take Jack Sparrow aboard his ship. This one had been a bit more potent, and gave the appearance of death to a man stricken by it.

Teach looked down at him, helpless and unwitting. He moved towards the body and nudged it with his foot. Philip gave the softest of groans as he was turned over onto his back, head lolling to the side and revealing his handsome face. He was a beautiful thing; pure and untouched by the wickedness of the world. How Blackbeard couldn’t be sure. Even after all he had witnessed upon his ship; the boy’s spirit had not been crushed. This was enviable; but to Blackbeard, who at his heart was a downtrodden man whom the world had failed, it only sought to vex him.

Why should anything remain pure and beautiful why he suffered and waned? Why should Philip be spared from the harsh realities of mortal life? He looked around him then, to make sure that he had not been followed. But there was no sign of any other crewmen, and even the sound of them by the camp fire was far off now. He shed himself of his dripping coat and hat, putting aside all unneeded affects and crouched beside the unconscious man in the dirt.

He ran a trembling, rough hand along his cheek, tracing the cheek bone and lightly letting his finger tip ghost over the softly parted lips. Blackbeard moaned in spite of himself. It had been too long since he’d properly been with another man, and though brief struggles with Sparrow had only increased his hunger for what he truly wanted. Jack wasn’t here now, but that didn’t mean he should waste a perfectly good opportunity to release some of his pent up frustrations.

He spread himself across the man, hungrily attaching his lips to his neck and jaw, leaving lightly bruised marks upon them as he hands worked across sun-tanned, labor hardened muscles of his back and stomach, trying to pull the limp man fully against him.

Philip whimpered softly, unaware of what was really happening as Blackbeard worked his rough palm down to the lacings of his breeches, already breathing heavily in anticipation.

Philip woke from a dark dream, groggy and hardly able to move his limbs. His mind, muddled by the drug, could sense that something strange was happening to him, but what he could not discern. He waited to hear the familiar rush of waves, or perhaps even the sweet musical sounds of Syrena's beautiful voice. Instead he felt the rough callous of groping hands moving across his skin and he shuddered, blinking up in a daze at the shadow that was leaning over him in the grey-blue early morning light. A shadow was bent over him, and under the daze of the drug, he could not rationalize it's being there. Whimpering a bit at the strange warm tingling sensation that had started below his waist, he tried to shake off his lethargy and the numbness in his limbs. He felt the wet connection of a mouth on the naked skin of his stomach and jolted, eyes wide. The shadow over him came into focus, and he recognized the heavily bearded face, the dark wicked eyes and cruel smirk. "What are you doing!?" he gasped, voice still thick and heavy so that it came out a slow garble rather than a clear demand.

Blackbeard pushed him flat as he struggled to get up on his elbows and positioned himself squarely between the man's legs, holding them apart. "Best you be quiet now, lad. I had hoped to take you without struggle, however–,"

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Blackbeard was completely stunned, startled and jolted by the scream that erupted from Philip's lips then, obliterating his calm explaination. The man jerked and jolted under his grip, clawing the ground and trying desperately to escape. "No! No, you mustn't touch me that way! No, no no no!" The sheer panic in him was overwhelming. The pirate captain struggled to maintain him, but even in his weakened state the man was strong as he thrashed and kicked. "Oh God! God help me!"

Irritated the older man straddled him, smothering a hand over his mouth to stave off his screams and pleas for help. "Quiet!" he hissed. "Who knows what you will bring down upon us!" But Philip could not be calmed. Blackbeard half wondered if the poison hadn't ridden him mad, for the wild fear in his eyes was almost primitive. "Please, please! You musn't! You musn't!"

"No amount of pleading has ever deterred me, lad. Ask your friend Captain Sparrow sometime..." he pirate muttered, forcing his legs a little further apart and trying to get his breeches down with one hand while the other struggled to hold the man's wrists. This however only made Philip shout more, actual tears forming in his eyes. Surely he had to be still delirious, out of his mind.

To Teach's great disappointment, his cries had not failed to rouse the crew, who now came running to see what the trouble was. "FATHER!" Angelica screeched, at the fore-front of the group. "Get off him now!"

"Stay out of this!" he barked back at her, as he grappled with the missionary's thrashing legs. "Help me! Help me!" he begged them. A few of the men, including Shandy moved forward, but Blackbeard unleashed his sword and pointed it at them, a surge of it's unnatural power actually tossing the entire group backwards a few feet. His zombie officers shuffled forward, creating a protective barrier between him and the crew. Gunner especially seemed eager for one of them to try to break the lines. Only Angelica seemed impervious to these warnings, and she dashed forward then, grabbing his shoulders and trying to physically remove him from the trashing man. At this interference he turned and struck her, throwing her to the ground where she laid stunned for a moment or two.

"Bloody hell," Scrum gasped, nervous and excited all at once by the violence before him. "This is getting good." He looked to the scrappy looking sailor next to him, "I'd like to double my bet. I say he'll take the bible boy and Angelica in one go."

“You’re making bets?!” Salaman boggled. “On whether or not the Christian gets violated?”

“Roughed up at the very least. I mean, let’s not pretend gentlemen, that the good captain isn’t exactly what he is. I’m honestly surprised it’s taken this long for him to snap.”

Shandy shoved at him angrily and turned and ran back through the group. “Oy! What’s he up to?” he asked, blinking back at him. They didn’t have to wait long to find out. A moment later the boy returned with one of the hefty fallen coconuts from one of the palms and hurled it with surprising strength and precision at the Captain. It struck Blackbeard squarely in the back, forcing him to pitch forward and fall flat on his face, his sword skittering across the ground. Philip was up and stumbling into a run, fleeing through the group back towards the pools where Syrena was still trapped, growing weaker in the sunlight.

The Captain cursed but did not follow him. He sat up, glaring darkly into the crowd. “Who?” he glowered, ignoring Angelica as she sat up painfully. “Now you’ve done it lad,” Scrum muttered. Blackbeard heard and reached for his sword, pointing it at the quivering youth. Shandy felt himself suddenly flung forward through the crowd, falling on his hands and knees in front of Blackbeard. “Now even children defy me,” he muttered darkly, shaking with growing rage. He grabbed the boy by his hair, making him yelp and dragged him up, laying the edge of the blade at his throat. “When we reach the Fountain, lad, ye may be so lucky as to sacrifice your years.”

“Captain Jack will stop you! He’ll kill you, you coward!” Shandy replied, quivering but defiant. Blackbeard gritted his teeth angrily, shaking him a little. “Damn your eyes, boy, if you think I will be felled by a–!” he paused then, an idea dawning in his mind. He became calm and a smile curled his lips, so much that it made them all shiver to look at it. “Yes. Captain Sparrow will come to save you, won’t he? All his noble intentions,” he looked back to Angelica who was just picking herself up, staring at him with wounded eyes. “Trying to save these poor, unfortunate souls.” He dropped Shandy hard to the ground and thrummed his boot heel across his back, winding him and rendering him motionless before moving forward through the gawking crowd.

Philip reached the pools, shaken and terrified, to find Syrena just as he had left her. Wrists staked above her head, she was helpless to submerge into the shallow water below her. Her pale skin began to burn in the growing sunlight, trapped in her half aquatic form and unable to transform fully, helpless to save herself. “Syrena!” He fell beside her, rousing her from her stupor, stroking her face. “Please, don’t die!” He fell into water next to her, wrapping his arms around her naked body, splashing her sensitive skin to help cool it. She stared at him in surprise, “Philip! You’re alive!”

He smiled shakily at her. “More or less, yes. Don’t worry, I will free you. We must leave this place at once, find Jack and get help.”

She smiled at him for the first time, and it was so bright and joyful that for a moment the young man felt his breath stolen away. In her relief, her eyes began to well with tears of joy. But the moment was short lived. A hand came seemingly from nowhere, grabbing her roughly by the hair and jerking her backwards. Philip tried to stave off the attack, but he was ripped from the pool by Gunner’s strong hands and restrained, as Blackbeard held Syrena’s face roughly between his hand, the other producing a vial, in which he captured two of her precious glittering tears.

“I thought you only needed one,” Angelica said, stepping behind her father and looking down at him, her warm eyes suddenly cold. He stood up again, tucking the vial away. “One for each victim, my dear. Two shall achieve immortality this day.” He put his arm around her and kissed her softly, but she did not return the gesture. “I am sorry,” he amended sweetly. “I was blinded. But now, the way is clear.”

He turned towards the gathered crew, smiling grandly at all of them. “Gents! Today, we make history! Our destiny, the end of our perilous quest is neigh!”

There came a roar of reply from his hexed crewmen, and the others offered a trembling, fearful response, for they knew they were expendable. “All the pieces are falling into place. But we can not celebrate without the guest of honor,” he noted plucking from his jacket the effigy of Jack.

“Let us call to him, shall we?”

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Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> COERCION/NON-CON/DUBIOUS CONSENT AHEAD!!!! Please read at your own risk and stay safe!

The sky above them was growing slowly lighter. They were unsure how long they had been walking, for each step seemed to take them no further than the last, and the landscape around them barely changed. They stumbled along the ground, talking about anything and everything just to keep themselves alert. Jack felt Hector growing heavier against him, and when he turned to look at his face for the first time in an hour or so, he saw that the older man was pale, clammy and shaken. “Shall we stop for a breather?” he asked gently, hoping to coax the other man into allowing them a rest. He had been so driven, so eager to catch up with the villain Blackbeard that he had ignored his own need for rest, along with everyone else.

“Can not stop now,” he muttered. “The Fountain’s so close...I can feel it in my bones.” He tried to move forward again and this time pitched forward. Jack and Groves both gave a little yell, catching the man and easing him to the ground. “You have to rest. You’re driving yourself too hard,” the officer scolded softly. “Nonsense,” Hector wheezed. “Just need a moment...just a moment is all...” But his eyes were drooping and he knew he could not will himself another inch further.

Jack called for Gibbs, who still trekked ahead of them to halt. Groves eased Barbossa back against him, letting the man lay his head in his lap, pressing a little kiss to his forehead. “You’ve earned a rest, sir.”

Hector looked up at him fondly and was asleep in seconds. Jack squeezed the sleeping man’s hand fondly and looked back to the troops. “Have a rest, gentlemen. We’ll be going no further for awhile. Enjoy it while you can.”

There was a collective sigh of relief from the ragged remainder of the crew behind them, for they were all weary and many of them had suffered glancing injuries from their encounter with the Spaniards. Groves pulled off his sullied jacket, rolled it into a pillow and placed it gently beneath Barbossa’s head. When the man was not disturbed by the movement, he took the opportunity to pull his boots from his feet, rubbing them painfully. “I had no idea there would be so much walking involved.”

Sparrow chuckled at him, “Many favor the land to the water, but I find her even more unforgiving.” the pirate said, looking sleepily off through the trees as he settled beside Hector. “At least upon the sea, a man can drift and sail, carried by the waves.” He wondered where Blackbeard was now, and what he would do when he met him again. After hearing Hector’s harrowing tale of his defeat upon the Black Pearl, his hatred for the pirate had grown even deeper, and the idea that he had been looking for him all that time made Jack feel deeply unsettled. There was something deadly beneath the surface of the wicked man’s scheme, but Jack couldn’t see it yet. One thing he knew for sure was that he had to discover a way to break the bokor’s means of controlling him. He

closed his eyes and probed his mind for some solution, something he might have seen once in the presence of Tia Dalma, or even his own parents.

His attention was recalled then to one of his most curious affects that traveled with him. It was tucked safely away below the loose edge of his sash, and as he loosened the leather strap that bound it, he took it into his palm and looked it over carefully; the shrunken head of his mother. Groves saw it and tensed at once; “Good lord, is that a human head?!” he gasped, startled by the macabre sight.

“This is my mother, thank you very much.” But this only seemed to make the officer feel more squeamish. “Why on Earth would you carry around such a thing?”

“We do things a bit differently in the Caribbean, darling. This what she wanted, after she died. It’s a way of preserving her memory, I guess. Never really understood it I guess, but my father always thought it was important. Until recently she’d been staying with him; then I guess he had a change of heart. Wanted her to ‘get out more’, I suppose...” He turned the blackened head over thoughtfully in his palm, staring at the sown eyelids and stitched mouth barbed with wooden spikes, and the long tattered dreads that remained intact for all these long years. Groves fumbled awkwardly for a response, not wanting to be rude, though he was still getting a feel for Jack. “Well, I’m very sorry for your loss. How did she die?”

“Murdered.” Jack said, somewhat emotionlessly. Not because he didn’t feel, but because it was simply a fact that had been for as long as he could remember. A fact that had turned the once proud and stalwart Captain Teague, Keeper of the Code of the Brethren, into a weeping, callous drunk who became distant and closed, even to his only son. Jack had always felt that when Teague looked at him, he saw in him the remains of the woman he loved more than anything in the world; and so he both loved and hated the boy for it.

“I’m so sorry.” Theodore added then, genuinely. “How did it happen?”

“No one knows. Apparently I was the only witness, and given that I was neigh but a tot, I couldn’t rightly name her killer. Many have been suspected, but a culprit has never been produced.” He squinted at the head; “Dad’s still terribly sorry about that, mum.”

He thought back on Blackbeard’s ominous words in the lighthouse, wondering if there could be a grain of truth in them. But why then had Teague never spoken of this possibility before, nor even that he knew Edward Teach himself? No, it was all falsehoods that Blackbeard used to vex him. Groves moved a little closer to the pirate, looking nervously at the head in his hand and tried not to be intimidated by it. “She’s uh...lovely.”

Jack smiled; “Ah, but you should have seen her in the flesh, luv. None could compare. A true jungle beauty, my mother was.” he spoke proudly.

“You come from good stock, then.” Groves added, leaning in and kissing Jack’s cheek. Sparrow nuzzled him and let the younger man rest his head upon his shoulder as they reclined next to their sleeping lover. “It’s times like this I wish she was still around, as it were. Might offer me some tribal wisdom right about now...” The morning was quiet and still, even dawn itself seemed unhurried to arrive. Jack felt his own tired eyes dropping. “Perhaps Hector has the right idea....just a bit of shut eye. I suppose the devil will still be there in an hour or so...” Glancing down he saw that Groves was already asleep on his shoulder, and Jack rested his head on his, letting the shrunken head rest in his lap and soon dropped off himself.

Time slipped by silently for a time. The day seemed dimmed before it began as heavy storm clouds passed over the horizon, dimming the light and bringing with it a salt-ridden wind that rustled quietly through the tree tops.

Their camp was calm and hushed, and Gibbs made himself a breakfast of charred toast and bird eggs over the camp fire, humming to himself as his companion Gillette dozed next to the little fire. He turned his gaze towards the sleeping heap of men to his left, the three curled around one another. Gibbs looked at the sleeping face of his captain, glad for once to see some real contentment and peace there. It seemed like Jack had been trying all his life to find such a thing in so many places and so many things. And while things were far from perfect, it seemed at last he had achieved some measure of happiness.

“It does my old heart good to see him like this,” he nodded, turning back to his meager meal. Gillette cracked an eye sleepily, his own tattered wig sliding down his forehead. “Hmm, you mean Sparrow? That tangle of sinful gain will not last him long.” he muttered. “I can not speak for the Admiral, I’ve always known he was that sort, but Groves will come around eventually and realize the mistake he’s made.”

“What bothers you more, Gillette, that he’s happy with a man, or with a pirate?”

The young officer sat up tiredly, looking at the old sailor. “You can’t possibly condone this. Listen, Gibbs, I know we have our differences, but you at least understand how things are meant to be, crude though you are. You can not think this will last.”

“It’s not for me to say,” Gibbs muttered. “But if there’s one thing I’ve learned in my long life, Gillette, is that a man who can only mock the happiness of others is the unhappiest soul of them all.”

The wind picked up a little then, ruffling his hair and sending bits of ash and cinders across the ground. Jack’s serene face suddenly contorted in a wince, then a grimace and abruptly he was awake, sitting up and staring around wide-eyed.

“Captain?”

Jack looked around nervously, but did not seem to hear or see Gibbs in front of him as he did not head him. Allowing Groves to fall to the side; which woke the exhausted sailor sourly, rubbing his head. “Jack, what are you...?” His question faltered when he saw Sparrow’s distressed features as he stood and began to nervously pace the ground, like an animal about to run. He held the sides of his head, fingers digging into his scalp as he muttered frantically to himself; “Have to go...have to go...!”

“Jack?” Groves reached for him, but Gibbs warned him not to, watching Sparrow’s strange actions cautiously. “Don’t touch him, lad. Something’s bewitched him.” Groves blinked fearfully to the old sailor, laying a hand upon Hector to shake him awake, but the Admiral was already alert and watching. “Jack?” he called calmly. Shaking, Sparrow turned and looked at him wide-eyed and harrowed. Hector extended his hand slowly; “Come here to me, luv. It’s alright. I know the old devil must be in your head, and his call is powerful. But we can overcome it,” he said, though there was no certainty in his voice.

Jack struggled with himself for another few moments, looking at them with wounded and

tormented eyes, then turned abruptly and seized the satchel containing the Chalices from it's place upon the ground. "Don't let him take 'em!" Hector cried then, reaching out but wasn't fast enough. Groves leapt over him and charged Jack as he turned, prize in hand and made to tackle him. "Stay away!" Jack barked, wrestling with the man who managed to get his arms around the pirate, squeezing across his chest. "I have to go to him! I have to! He'll hurt me!"

"Who will, Jack!?"

Hector rose from his place on the ground, frightened by the sight in front of him. "We have to stun him!" He barked at Gibbs, in hopes that he would have a blunt object to strike with, just as Groves lost his battle with Sparrow, and the dark man took off at a run through the thicket ahead. "I'll stop him," Gillette muttered, pulling his pistol and stepping forward, taking aim at one of Sparrow's legs.

"Don't you dare!!" As Barbossa surged forward to attempt to stop Jack, it was Groves who turned upon Gillette, forcing his gun into the air and throwing him upon the ground. Belting him hard across the face with his fist and rendering the man bruised and unconscious.

"Jack! Jack!" Both Gibbs and Hector darted after the fleeing man, Hector hardly able to keep pace as Gibbs raced on ahead. "Captain! Captain come back!"

But Jack was too fast, and soon he lost sight of him all together. Panting, the sailor finally fell against a rock to catch his breath as Barbossa slowly caught up to him. "Damn!" he hissed bitterly. "I should have seen the signs, been prepared for this sort of stunt!"

"How could ye have been?" Joshamee wheezed. "I don't know what sort of wickedness Blackbeard has himself tangled up in, but whatever it is it be mighty powerful."

"Aye, and getting stronger I fear."

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Sparrow ran, spurred on as if Davy Jones himself were at his heels. The compulsion that had taken over his very core drove him forward, even though he was every bit aware that this was not his will. If only he had been able to capture that damned doll, he might have been able to avoid this foreseeable disadvantage. Now all he could do was hope that Hector, Groves and the others were able to catch up with him.

He heard the sound of rushing water and knew he was getting closer. He emerged from the jungle to find himself standing at the edge of a great cluster of shallow pools, and beyond it a waterfall, leading downwards into the wide mouth of a cave that was just beyond his location, hazy in the watery mist.

He climbed down the slate rocks, following the cascade of water and ignoring the bones of long dead mermaids that lingered at the edges of dried out pools. "Blackbeard?" he called over the sound of water; "Teach?"

Coming to the lowest point of the rock valley near the cave, he found the crew waiting for him. Zombie officers closed behind him as he continued to walk calmly towards his tormentor, who stood calmly, smiling at him even as he held Shandy at his feet upon his knees, knife held to his throat with one hand, the other cradling the voodoo doll; and Philip Swift, battered and dazed stood at gun point by Angelica at his right.

“So good of you to join us, Captain Sparrow. I was beginning to worry.”

Jack came to a stop before them, looking worriedly at the two battered young men held captive. “You have what you want,” the pirate muttered, pulling the satchel strap from over his shoulder and tossing the Chalices to the ground in front of them. “You needn’t harm them to get it.”

Blackbeard grinned in delight at the sight of the coveted goblets needed for his transformation, and released Shandy, who staggered into a run and threw himself into Sparrow’s arms. “I knew you wouldn’t abandon us! He said you would, he said you didn’t care, but I knew better!” The boy all but wept against his shirt. Jack smoothed his hair and hugged him close as Philip too was released and came staggering forward, hugging Sparrow briefly to him. “Truly, you are an honorable man.” he grinned in relief, as though Jack were a messenger of God, sent to deliver him from this terror. “He has the tears, Jack. It’s my fault, he tricked me! But now Syrena, she’s dying, we have to–!”

Sparrow looked at him worriedly, seeing the teeth marks upon his throat and chest, but before he could speak, Teach interrupted; “You think he hastened all to your rescue, do you?” he chuckled. “He would have abandoned you, all of you,” his eyes flickered to Angelica, for he had begun to perceive a new sympathy from her on Jack’s behalf; “If I had not forced him to come running back. Isn’t that right, Jack?”

Shandy and Philip looked scornfully upon the other Captain as they stood near Jack. Carefully the tan skinned pirate extracted the boy from his waist, leaving him in the care of the missionary as he sauntered towards Blackbeard; “Tell me, Teach, are you scared?”

“What have I to fear?” The old man grinned, taking one of the chalices in hand and showing Jack the vial that contained Syrena’s tears; “You’ve brought me the last pieces of the puzzle.” He took the bejeweled end of one of Jack’s dreads and twisted it between his fingers; “And I am grateful, dear Jack.”

Sparrow caught his wrist in his hand and jerked it aside, twisting it a bit. “I have spoken with your doom, Edward Teach,” Jack snarled. “The One Legged Man is close now. And his vengeance is something terrible to behold.” At this the color ran from Blackbeard’s chiseled cheeks and his eyes grew, and Jack saw true fear in him. To Teach, The One Legged Man was as if the coming of the Grim Reaper. He wondered what the man would think now, if he were to realize that he had been the engineer of his own death; for if he had not harmed Barbossa, he would not be hunting him.

“You’re lying.” Blackbeard muttered finally, twisting away from Jack. He gave the voodoo doll’s arm a brutal twist and Jack screamed in result, dropping to his knees and holding his throbbing shoulder. “Not that it matters now. I have all that I require.”

Angelica moved forward to gather the Chalices, looking over their careful inscriptions with wide, fascinated eyes. Now that she stood on the brink of all she and Blackbeard had schemed for, she found herself excited...yet somehow empty. She looked at Sparrow panting painfully upon his knees, and back at the battered Cabin Boy and the Missionary, and of all the doomed, fearful faces surrounding them in the remaining crew, even the sightless, soulless eyes of the zombie’s. Was this truly the path she was meant to take? Had she fallen so far, become the monster Jack claimed?

Sparrow looked at her silently from his crouched place upon the rocks, and she opened her mouth to speak to him; but Blackbeard interrupted. “Dearest,” he reached down and plucked Jack up again, putting an arm around him and holding him closely. “Jack and I are going to go down into the cave, to make sure that the way is clear for you and the others. Remain here and be vigilant. I wouldn’t want anyone to interrupt the proceedings.”

She nodded, but her expression was an unhappy one. Blackbeard turned, shoving Jack ahead as they made their way down the rest of the water slick slate rocks towards the cave below. The swarthy pirate walked just ahead, never far from Teach’s reach, but just far enough that he could breathe. His mind was turning over an escape plan even then. He would show Teach the Cave, and while he pretended to preform a ritual to open the magical entrance, he would bash the old blighter over the head with a rock and make a run for it. If he could steal the Sword of Triton back, he would be able to hold the Zombie’s off long enough for the crew to escape as well.

“Well, here we are then,” Jack said with false excitement as they skittered their way into the mouth of the cave, which glittered with dripping stalagmites and stalagtites, the crystal blue water of the waterfall beyond dribbling into it and making everything shine in the early morning sunlight. Even the air in here felt different, strange. Jack noticed, as he looked down at the curved walls and floor, that the water did not seem to flow naturally here. Instead of downstream, it turned and ran upward, along the walls. He wondered if Teach had noticed this yet.

“And how do we open the passage?” Blackbeard asked from somewhere behind him. Distracted by the fascinating direction of the water, Jack did not hear the man as he moved steadily behind him. It was all Teach could do to restrain his excited breath, for this was the moment he had so been longing for, that he had spent exhaustive hours in his cabin practicing and researching, draining his soul and often bringing him to the edge of death. To bend another will to his own; to utterly obliterate the host personality and create instead a new one of his own design. The blood he had sacrificed, the men he had broken and left empty shells, all for this moment...

Muttering the spell softly beneath his breath, he stepped behind Sparrow. The other pirate suddenly became aware of his closeness and turned in surprise as Teach’s hand gripped the side of his face...

He blinked awake then, as if from a some deep daydream that he had unknowingly slipped into. He was standing on deck of a small sloop, staring out into a familiar habor; Tortuga. The pirate gripped the rail to steady himself, for he felt suddenly dizzy and disoriented. How had he gotten here? Wasn’t he somewhere else before?

But when he thought about, he could only conclude that he had been standing here all along. The sea breeze felt good on his skin, and as it moved through his hair, which felt thicker, heavier, he heard the gentle tinkling of it’s adornments clinking together. He made to touch one, noticing that it was a small silver cross, and gave a jolt at the sight of his own hand.

He was pale, surprisingly so. He leaned over the rail then and caught a glimpse of his reflection in the clear blue water. It was not a face he recognized; at least not at once. He was paler than he felt

he should be, his skin the color of a sunburned white man rather that the deep rich tan that he felt should have been there. His eyes were different, his nose, his mouth. Everything was so different, yet so familiar.

Frightened, he turned away and made to dash down the deck, and found himself face to face with someone new. “Something wrong, Teague?”

The man in front of him was bit sunburned as well, with sleek black hair that fell just at the top of his shoulders, a carefully trimmed goatee of the same ink black hair, and dark eyes. He didn’t know why, but he felt stunned by the man’s youthfulness, and his attire, which appeared to the tattered shambles of an old Naval uniform, confined with found clothing that was a bit too loose and ill-fitting. “What did you call me?”

The man in front of him chuckled a little; “Still a little hung over, eh?” he grinned, and much to his surprise he moved close to him, putting an arm around his waist and nuzzling against him, threading a hand through his thick dark hair. “I figured that’s where you went when you left the cabin.”

The stranger made to kiss him, but he stepped back hurriedly. “Easy mate! I’m not in the business of cozying up to perfect strangers.” he warned, gripping the rail for support, for his legs felt weak and shaky. Certainly he did feel hazy, as if he’d had too much to drink. The other man chuckled at him, giving him a concerned, but assuring look; “I’d hardly call us strangers at this point. Don’t think you’re getting out of this by feigning madness, either. You promised me we’d sail around the island today, and you’d show me that secret cove you keep talking about. The one you hid your ship in from the Navy?”

He remembered the secret cove then clearly, for he had used it often to hide himself in when the Navy or other rouge pirates were in pursuit. It was something only the Brethren and those loyal to the Code knew of. Why then was had he promised this strange he’d reveal it’s hidden location?

“Teague?”

“That’s not my name!” he yelled then, snapping at the man as he tried again to get close to him. “It’s not my name...it’s someone else’s name...” He glared back at the handsome man in front of him. “But I know your name. It’s Edward. Edward Teach.”

“Drummand, originally, but Teach has a nicer ring to it, don’t you think?” the other, younger man chuckled. He touched his face, and immediately the pirate felt calm again, assured that this was right and that his fears and disorientation were merely something brought on by a long night of drinking and little sleep. Very little sleep. In fact, he realized blushing a little as the younger man moved in to kiss him deeply, no sleep at all.

The man kissed him heatedly, and he soon found himself drawn into the desperation of it. Teach was a passionate kisser, whom seemed to put his whole body into the experience, for he could feel him leaning heavily into him, arms around him tightly. It felt good, enticing certainly, but something about it seemed off. Finally Teach broke away, breathing deeply; “Lets go below again, shall we?”

He felt a twinge of fear at the prospect; though it seemed silly to. He knew exactly what the man wanted, and knew that it was something he was inclined for, hell almost eager for as well. But

there was a nagging little voice in the back of his head that told him he shouldn't.

"I've more rum, if you like first."

"Sounds lovely, darling." He took the man's hand and let him lead him below deck. Inside the shallow cabin of the sloop; there was a small and rather rumbled looking bed that they had shared the night before. Blankets and pillows had been tossed carelessly to the floor, and there were several discarded bottles of rum and wine littering barrel end tables, and tossed aside coats and pistol belts. On a small table in the corner, lit by a rather large silver candelabra that was obviously stolen, was a map of the Caribbean Sea, with several locations circled in ink. Locations that he somehow felt this man should not be aware of. Teach tugged him towards the bed and bade him to sit down.

He did, still feeling a bit strange. He felt strongly that he would have liked to close his eyes and sleep, but that didn't seem possible. His eyes drunk in every detail of the cabin around them, for they all seemed familiar, if not slightly off. His companion, and apparent lover poured him a hefty glass of rum and held it out for him. "I apologize for my forwardness," he amended. "But I can not lie, I am smitten with you, Captain."

"Are you?" he found himself chuckling a little before drinking deeply from the glass. The rum tasted dry and burned his throat as it went down, and did nothing for his persisting disorientation. "I must admit, I am growing rather fond of you, Edward." To his surprise, he pulled the man into another kiss. It felt excitement growing in the pit of his stomach, heightened as the other man sucked lightly on his lower lip while his hand crept along the sharp line of his hip and down his thigh before reaching around to lightly grip his backside and push lightly into him.

He wavered on his feet then, swaying slightly to the right. Teach caught him and eased him down onto the bed. "Are you alright, luv?"

"Not sure...I am a bit weary, and feel more drunk than sober, despite our reprieve." He smiled at the other man who was leaning over him, still running his greedy hands along his skin, shrugging away any inhibiting fold of cloth or clothing. "How is it you're so full of energy? You're making me feel like an old man."

He felt as if he were, or should be an old man. Not him exactly, but this man called Teague. And the man before him as well. But that thought didn't seem to make sense, and it was pushed away by another heated kiss, followed by the feeling of having his boots and sash removed, greedy hands running all along his skin. He moaned, nerves firing and sending a delicious tingling sensation all through his body, enticing the growing heat in his groin to rise. "Let me take care of you this time," Teach spoke, his dark eyes seeming to gleam with lust, "You've been so generous to me."

Caught between wanting more and the strange need to flee, he found he could not quite reply. But his body was too tired to stand and walk away. And he did want this. He wanted it more than he realized he could. Teach pulled him out of his waist coat, untying the paisley red and green scarf from around his head so that his heavy mass of hair fell free before stealing another rough kiss from his lips, hands busy untucking the ends of his tunic. "This is right. This is where we belong, Teague, just you and I, sailing the tide forever, conquering any who stand in our way. With your power as a Pirate Lord and my swordsmanship, we could be unstoppable."

He nodded eagerly, helping the man out of his own jacket and pulling open his shirt as Teach groaned, before pushing him down flat against the mattress. "Allow me..."

That wave of dizziness came again, and he found it easier to close his eyes and lay back, feeling the man's mouth moving down his chest and stomach before sliding his hot tongue along the length of him. He jolted, crying out as his mouth encircled him, sucking hard. He gripped the sheets, as if they would save him from falling into so dark unseen abyss, and buried one hand in the other man's dark hair. He had a vauge, strange thought that it should not be black, but vivid red, and that the name spilling from his lips should not be "Edward" but instead "Hector."

That name seemed out of place here, but right all the same. It was everything else that he could see with his own eyes that seemed wrong. The man was working him roughly, making him gasp and cry out as he starred around the cabin, trying to rationalize that it all made sense, that this was where he should and wanted to be. Teach's fingers worked their way beneath him, lifting his hips into his lap and stretching him experimentally. He cried out harshly in response, eyes turning towards the ceiling. This was wrong. Somehow it was all wrong.

"I love you, Teague. I need you, stay with me."

The sentiment felt real enough, and the look on Teach's handsome young face told him that he did in fact mean what he said. But he could not bring himself to express the same warmth and affection for the other man. There was someone else that those feelings belonged to, someone that should have been here in his place but was not.

He began to resist, staring at the ceiling. It seemed hazy, shimmering like a mirage. Then the ceiling wasn't a ceiling at all, but the strange, dark dripping curvature of a cave, and Teach looked older, meaner, darker. "This isn't right...this isn't real!"

Teach gritted his teeth, realizing in his lust and eagerness to have what he had so long desired, he was allowing his hold to slip. Below him Jack thrashed upon the cold wet rock, eyes still dark and clouded but struggling towards awareness. "No, no...!" Blackbeard muttered, already feeling the exertion of manipulating his mind and body to his reality; "I've waited too long for this! You won't deprive me of it now!"

He lifted Jack roughly into a seated position upon his lap, keeping one palm pressed against the man's skull to better keep him under, and pushed himself roughly inside of him in one quick, brutal thrust.

He arched backwards, mouth wide as he yelled; "AHHH!"

Teach grinned against his neck, biting at it roughly, and he clung to him for support, for there was nothing else to grab hold of. He was back in the cabin, upon their bed, with his young, new lover roughly fucking him in a savage, almost desperate manner. The cave ceiling, it must have been a delusion, or something brought on by too much drink and not enough sleep. He did feel pleasantly drunk, hazy and liberated from the need of control. But as much as he gave in, allowing the other man to control each movement, his lover still seemed to feel the need to conquer him.

"Yes...yes!!" Teach groaned, grinning as sweat dripped down his back and neck, face red from their brutal pacing. His partner was gasping raggedly, each jolt of hips and thighs crashing up into him causing a serge of pleasure laced with pain. "Oh Teague, I love you! I love you, yes! Yes!" He drove up harder, faster and Jack cried out, pleasure turning to pain as his perception of reality began

to twist and bend. “Say you love me, Teague. Say you’ll be mine forever. Promise me! Swear it!”

They were both on the edge of imminent release, and he slowly began to become aware again...he was not Teague...he was not meant to be here. He was Jack Sparrow...and the man before him, driving into his so deeply and making him both hate and love him at once was Blackbeard!

“NO! NO!”

But it was too late. As Teach’s carefully constructed delusion came crashing down around Jack, the older pirate roared in release, jerking Sparrow roughly up and down upon him as he spilled inside him, and Jack came as well, sputtering and blinded by the intense release.

It all fell apart, the ship, the cabin, the sea, the youthful memory of Edward Teach as he had been in a time before his heart was dark and corrupted, leaving Sparrow shuddering and senseless, barely able to move.

Blackbeard struggled for breath, his shirt sticky with sweat and clinging to his back as he rocked Sparrow in his lap, for the first time feeling real completion, a glimmer of happiness he had so long sought. The spell had broken a little too soon and had not been as soundly constructed as he hoped, but it was real progress. He had been inside Jack’s mind, merged it with his own memories and creations and had made something real. Or just as good, anyway.

Sparrow was limp in his arms, lying against him like a broken doll. He hoped sincerely that the spell had not proven too much for the pirate’s mind and left him a shattered shell, as it had on other victims in the past. He cradled the younger man lovingly, tenderly and kissed his cheeks and lips, smoothing back his thick hair. He wasn’t his Teague, but he was nearly as good as, and soon there would hardly be a difference.

“Thank you, thank you...” the old man shuddered, almost weeping in gratitude. “I’ve waited so long. All the wasted years...but it’s over now. I love you, Teague.”

The limp body in his arms came abruptly to life then, Jack jerking backwards and painfully dislodging himself from the softening man who was still inside him, wide eyed and terrified, “No...NO! NO!! WHAT DID YOU DO TO ME!? WHAT DID YOU DO?!”

Barbossa, Groves and Gibbs were making headway through the brush, following Jack’s tracks of crushed foliage and broken branches and the growing sound of flowing water. “We’re getting close to it now,” Gibbs panted towards the other two men, who were going as fast as they could, Hector struggling the most but having the most determination as well. He propelled himself across the uneven ground with his crutch, and each time his balance was threatened he cursed and redoubled his efforts.

“I don’t understand,” Groves panted. “What happened to Jack?”

“Some powerful witchery, my lad,” Gibbs nodded, finding himself barely able to keep pace with

Barbossa. “Ye see it’s been rumored that over the years, Edward Teach, otherwise known as the feared and notorious pirate Blackbeard, sold his soul as it were to the heathen gods of the native jungles of Haiti. Vodun be the proper name, but most sailors know it as voodoo, witchcraft found in the darkest reaches of Africa. The tales say that he can not only raise the dead with this unholy power, but bend a man to his whims, control their actions and words, as if they were puppets on a string.”

The old sailor glanced at the dark look upon Barbossa’s face and realized he should say no more. They heard a shout then from ahead. “Jack!” Hector gasped, darting forward. The foliage gave way to a cliff of rocks along a cascading fresh water river bed, leading into a deep cave below. From their perch on the hill, Hector could see two figures at the mouth of the cave. Sparrow was on the ground, apparently naked, and screaming, with Blackbeard crouched above him.

“JACK!” Hector made to leap, almost as though he could jump the distance, but Groves grabbed him and forced him flat upon the ground. “No, sir! No!” As they struggled, hearing Jack’s shouts of anguish and terror, they saw movement from the right as the rest of Blackbeard’s crew started towards the commotion.

Gibbs staid crouched beside the two struggling men as Hector cursed; “Release me damn you! He needs me! He needs me!”

“If you go now you’ll be of help to no one!” Theodore replied, though it broke his heart to see the torment on Hector’s face and to hear it in Jack’s cries from afar.

Shuddering on the rocks, hardly able to get a full gulp of air, Jack Sparrow, broken and ravaged screamed himself hoarse; “What did you do!? What did you do?! By Gods I was there! I was him! I was my father! You raped my father in my mind! But it was me, not him ..you...Oh GODS!” He made to leap upon Blackbeard like some wild, maddened thing, but the old bokor was able to stave off his assault, forcing him upon the ground and holding back his clawing hands, which threatened not only to tear Blackbeard apart, but himself as well.

Teach had seen this sort of madness take a man after such an experience, but it would not do to have Jack ruined and crazed. His plan was not yet fully executed. “Calm yourself Sparrow, or so help me I’ll bash your brains on these rocks! No harm has come to ye–!”

“YOU WERE INSIDE ME!” Whether he meant physically or mentally, it didn’t matter, both were a violation of the worst kind.

“Captain! Captain Sparrow!”

Philip’s voice broke through the sound of Jack’s anguish and Blackbeard’s curses and he was there suddenly at the mouth of the cave, along with Angelica and the others, all staring. Jack managed to fling Blackbeard aside, and crawled towards the man as he dashed towards. Philip reached for him, but Blackbeard drew his weapon and pointed it squarely at the two; “Not another step!”

“Captain Jack! Captain!”

“Shandy, don’t come down here, boy!” Philip shouted back, and Salaman did his best to hold the boy back and keep him from view of his ravaged hero. Slowly, Angelica came to join them there

upon the rocks, her eyes moving from her father to Jack quivering upon the ground. Philip gave her a pleading look, and she bent beside the Captain as he reached and put his arms around her neck, allowing her to hold him. “Help me...if you ever loved me at all Angelica...help me...”

The woman’s eyes were wide in disbelief. She had convinced herself for so long that Jack Sparrow was incapable of real human emotion, that he was a shallow cad who used people to get what he wanted, never regarding how it might hurt them. Therefore it was an affront to everything she had come to believe about the man to see him so broken in her arms. Often she had pictured him weeping and begging for her forgiveness...but this was something awful, something twisted and terrible. His pain was tangible, and she forgot all his misdeeds before. Nothing he had done could warrant this. Not even abandoning her.

She pulled her pistol from her belt as Blackbeard straightened his clothing and put himself together once more, and to his surprise found that she pointed it squarely at his chest. “What have you done to him?”

He blinked in confusion and then smiled slowly; “I find myself in a bewilderment, dear daughter. Did you not desire to see him suffer for his trespasses?”

“You have gone too far,” she said, her voice tight an angry. “You promised me no more torture. No more of this dark magic! You promised me!”

His smile faded and he looked at her sourly. “I promised you a great many things, dear girl.” He stepped forward to take Jack from her, and she cocked back the hammer of her pistol with a shaking hand and made to fire. He just stared at her; “You wouldn’t kill your own loving father, would you?”

She faltered, face crumbling and allowed the pistol to fall away. But this time Philip stepped forward, reaching for it instead, not willing to see anyone else suffer at Blackbeard’s hands. The pirate Captain turned and fired upon the man. With cry from both Jack and Angelica, Philip staggered and fell, a bullet hole in his chest.

“PHILIP!”

Angelica gaped between the wounded man to the pirate as Jack crawled towards him, his own injuries forgotten. “Philip! Philip, stay with me, luv! You’re going to be fine!” he promised, leaning over the gasping man. The bullet had hit high, missing his heart and lungs and striking him in the collar bone, which must have broken. It caused him a great deal of pain and seemed to have winded him, but it was not a fatal wound.

“No!” Shandy screamed from above, fighting his way free of Salaman and Scrum and rushing down towards them. He picked up a rock and hurled it at Blackbeard, striking him in the shoulder. “You bastard!”

Blackbeard turned his pistol upon the boy then, ready to fire as well, and was struck suddenly and viciously in the arm by a dagger. Gasping in pain, he looked down at the protruding handle, recognizing it as his daughter’s; but she hadn’t thrown it. Jack had, for he had lifted it from her belt. The disheveled pirate was snarling at him, all too ready to fight. “I won’t miss next time.” he warned.

Teach leered back, gripping the handle and jerking the blade free from his arm. There was a small spurt of blood, and then the man muttered over the wound, and it ceased to perforate. “You’ll find

I'm a very hard man to kill, Jack Sparrow." he sneered, grabbing the man by the hair and dragging him away. "OPEN THE PASSAGE!"

Gibbs watched as more pirates filtered into the mouth of the cave, and the water from the pools and falls began to bubble and churn strangely. "Something's happening," he said to the other two. Theodore finally allowed Hector to sit up, and they looked on in curiosity, waiting to see what would happen next.

"I can wait no longer," Hector hissed, darting down the hill side, allowing himself to slide along the rocky terrain until he came upon the flat surface. Gibbs and Groves followed as he limped towards the mouth the cave, water splashing beneath them.

To their great surprise they found not a whole gaggle of pirates, but one downed man, bleeding upon the rocks. Hector recognized him at once; "Mr. Swift!"

He knelt beside the wounded man, who reached for him in surprise, and smiled up at him, handsome face pale with pain; "So the tales Jack told were true," he whispered. "I am glad you are safe, sir. You're looking well..."

"I wish I could say the same for you, boy." Hector replied gravely. "Time is short, lad. Where are Jack and the others?" As the three men collected around him, Philip pointed towards the ceiling. "Through there..."

"He's raving." Gibbs replied. "That's not but solid rock!"

"Jack spoke something...then it opened up...like a great hole in the sky and they were gone..." He was fading, darkness eating the edge of his vision. "Syrena...I must go to her!"

"Who?" Groves asked.

"The mermaid..."

Hector seemed reluctant, but they had no hopes of reaching Jack in the Fountain beyond without knowing what those words were. And a mermaid might just know. "Help him up," Barbossa instructed to Gibbs as Groves helped him right himself. "Where is she?"

"In the pools above, dying."

They hurried up the slick, smooth rocks, until the woman came into view. She was in a bad way, lying face down against the rocks, her arms still staked above her head. She was limp and motionless, and her golden scales had begun to break and shed themselves from her tail.

Groves was startled by this helpless, pitiful creature, so different from the ones he had encountered at Whitecap Bay. "Oh the poor thing," he gasped, allowing Philip to lay beside her upon the rocks. "I think we may already be too late."

"Free her hands, we've got to get her into the water," Hector replied, turning now as he heard their men catching up to them and filing out after them onto the rocks. Groves cut her bonds and delicately eased the seemingly senseless woman back into the pool. Once submerged, she seemed

to completely revive, her burned skin healing and her long tail churning excitedly. She bobbed for a moment below then emerged once more, worriedly gripping Philip's hand. "You saved me."

The missionary reached for her, stroking her dark beautiful hair. "Syrena, forgive me. Were it not for me, this would not have happened." he pleaded. She held him close, putting her hand gently over his bleeding wound. "You're hurt."

"Syrena..." He was fading, losing the battle with consciousness as he continued to bleed. She leaned up and captured his lips, kissing him and pulling him into the water with her. Groves almost shouted, but Hector waved him off. Philip was never in a safer place than he was in her arms. Groves stared, utterly stunned and mystified as he watched the man's bleeding wounds begin to close under her touch. Until now, he only believed that mermaids could harm. Now he saw the duality of their existence, and there was duality in them all; the power to harm and to heal.

Groves watched the pair silently, not wanting to intrude upon this tender moment between them, but then saw the desperation again in Hector's face even as he instructed their crew, and remembered Jack's pleas. "Forgive me," he said quickly, swallowing his lingering fear of the beautiful creature before him. She looked at him with her dark fathomless eyes, and he saw kindness there, something more human than the others; "We need your help. Our companion has been taken into the Fountain beyond the cave wall. Do you know how we may enter?"

She stared at him without speaking, and he trembled a little before her. He looked pleadingly to her then; "Please...if you can help us, you must. So many have suffered. People I care for, people I love..." He looked to Hector then. "I need your help."

Philip squeezed her hand; "These are good, honorable men, Syrena. You can trust them."

Her eyes turned from him, to Hector and finally back to Groves. "I know." she put her other hand over his. "I will help you."

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Teach marveled at it all as he stood there among the shallow water and rocks. He realized he was looking almost exactly at where he had been standing just moments before, but that the cave itself had been an illusion of powerful and ancient magic, and that before him was the truth.

Among twisting green vines and crumbling ancient stairs stood a tiny island among the shallow, clear waters. There, perched in unnatural and strange form, was a circular rock, weathered and broken with time, for it had formed an open circle at it's center. And through this open, flowed the smallest trickle of water. The life giving waters of the Gods themselves.

Staring now upon the strange and mystic sight shrouded in damp mist and pale sunlight, Blackbeard began to laugh. It started as a chuckle, then grew into a roar, nay a scream of delight. "I

have found you at last!" he bellowed joyfully, starting towards it, still dragging Jack along behind him. "Look at it Jack! Just gaze upon it's glory and tell me that you are not moved! The Fountain itself, here before us! All our work, all that we have toiled for, suffered for!" He looked to the other pirate. "And we have suffered, haven't we Teague?"

Sparrow tore himself away from him, staggering into the waters away from the other man. "Don't you dare to call me by that name! He was never yours and neither am I! You're mad Teach! Raving! All these years of tearing your soul into pieces for the power of other world has bereft you of your senses!"

He tried to stand and fight, but his brutal treatment in the cave had left him weak and dazed, and he could barely keep his feet, much less do battle.

The others joined them now, walking through the strange mist that had covered them as they had been carried upward, beyond the barrier of the cavern. "Blimey, it does exist!" Scrum gasped in surprise, removing his hat from his head as he stared around.

"Aye, Scrum! It does!" Teach grinned, snaring Jack once more and dragging him closer to the Fountain. Now they could see the strange skeletal remains of long dead human sacrifices, testament that others had reached the sacred place. They were strange and twisted with ragged remains of clothing, looking as if they had been through a typhoon.

Jack looked now to Teach with a new fear; "What exactly did you bring me here for? The truth, if you still have a grain of it in you."

"The truth?"

"Yes, father." Angelica said sharply then, stalking towards them. "I think it's about time you gave your true intentions. To all of us." Instead of standing at his side, she stood instead near Jack, offering him her protection. She gave him a look of remorse and regret. "You were right; I was blind. But no longer."

"There's the girl I know." Sparrow grinned weakly. "Come a bit late, but I'll take it all the same."

Blackbeard chuckled, bringing their attention once more to him; "So, you have chosen a side have you? Finally given up on your dear old papa, have you?" He produced from the Jack's stolen satchel the Chalices, allowing the bag to fall forgotten to the steps below. From inside another forgotten object tumbled, and Jack blinked at it in interest, for it was his own compass.

"Very well then," Teach announced. "If it's the truth you want, then by God, you shall have it!" He neatly placed the Chalices upon the rocks and produced the vial containing Syrena's glittering tears. "I was not always the brutal villain you see before you, gentlemen! Once, I was an honest sailor, as I have always said."

"Lies."

"The lies, Jack Sparrow, were the ones your dear father told me. You see, it was him that took this poor, disaffected wayward sailor beneath his wing, saved him from an otherwise bad and untimely end. Your father...The Great Captain Teague, Pirate Lord and Keeper of the Code! Lead astray I was by that man, wooed with promises of riches and freedom. Damnable, gullible fool that I was, I fell in love with the man. And he took full advantage of my affections."

The memory of what had transpired just minutes before struck sharply in Jack's mind, as he slowly

began to realize that it was not all fantasy, but partly truth. Teach's lined and angry face softened sadly for a moment as he looked down at the pirate who crouched at his feet, unable to stand. "It grieves me, Jack, to think how things might have been different. I might have had a hand in your up bringing, been able to mentor you..."

He reached to touch him and Jack spat on him. "I see her in you now. In your eyes, especially. That devil woman. Heathen Goddess of the Tides, curse upon men! She stole him from me! Your damned heathen bitch of a mother!"

Jack made to leap at him, but Angelica held him back for his own safety, for Teach still remained readily armed. "My mother was twice the pirate you could ever hope to be, Teach! She never would have been felled by a cowardly cut throat cur like you!"

Teach's lips curled back in a feral grin and he seized Jack's face once more, fingers clenched about his forehead and cheek bone, "Then pay witness yourself!" Sparrow barely had time shout before he suddenly found himself elsewhere again. But this was no hallucination this time. No, instead he found himself inside Teach's mind; in his memory.

He was in a familiar place, though it was one that had passed almost out of thought for him. He was seeing the inside of a ship's cabin, but it was not that of the Queen Anne's Revenge, or even of the Adventure as he had seen before.

A woman, tall and shapely with skin dark and rich like coffee stood cradling a small child in her arms, singing quietly to him as they paced the cabin in front of a cradle. Jack recognized the restless babe in her arms as himself, and he felt breathless. The woman before him was his own mother, who's face he had long forgotten. She had been beautiful in life. Piled upon her head was a mountain of twisted, braided dreads, her beautiful face, neck and shoulders marked with strange tattoos the likes Jack had seen before on Tia Dalma, and her garb was the ransacked combination of a man's tunic, bone corset, and breeches with a bright red scarf of fine Singapore silk tied around her waist. Jack realized it was the same scarf that he now wore around his own head.

Outside there was the sound of battle, or men's screams and the clashing of sabers. The child in Thalicia's arms whimpered at the sounds and she shushed him gently, his eyes drooping further. She turned cautiously towards the door, her dark eyes watchful and wary. Outside, Jack heard the bellow of his father in battle, and his mother smiled as she turned at last and put the dozing child down inside the blankets of his cradle.

In doing so, her back remained turned, and the door of the cabin opened slowly. A man stepped inside, holding the hilt of a knife, his dark lined eyes upon the woman bent over the cradle. Jack did not recognize him at first, for this was an older, darker, more world-weary version of the man he'd seen in Teach's fantasy. This was Edward Teach, just two short years later, as the beginning of the fiend now known throughout the seven seas as Blackbeard.

The woman heard the creak of the door as it closed behind them and whirled, eyes wide. She made as if to draw her sword that dangled from the belt around her waist, then paused at the sight of the man who intruded upon her. "Teach?" Her Haitian accent was thick, but not unintelligible, and Jack felt himself a little breathless at hearing his mother's voice for the first time in recent memory. "What are ya doin' here? Why are ye not out d'ere with the others, there's a battle going on!"

"I'm right where I should be," Teach answered, stepping a little closer, his eyes narrowed upon her.

He felt his mother's growing apprehension as she gazed at the other man she was so briefly acquainted with. "I need no protectin', if that's what ya mean. Did Teague send ya in here?"

"In a way." Teach answered. "I'm here on his behalf."

She shook her head, confounded and annoyed by his intrusion; "I have not time for dis. If ye not have good reason for disturbing my boy, then be takin' your leave. Hard enough to keep a child calm in these waters..." She moved aside briefly to soothe little Jack and then to secure her pistol belt around her waist, and Teach peered behind her at the tiny boy inside the crib. "Don't worry. This won't take long."

The tall woman eyed him then, suspecting for the first time some ill will from the other man; "I did not know you were in these waters. With what crew did you come?" she asked slowly, trying not to sound as suspicious as she must have felt.

"I was sailing for the coast of Jamaica when my crew and I spotted your ship in distressed. I would not let Teague fight alone."

"Generous of you," she nodded, "But the battle started less than ten minutes ago. There be no way your little sloop could carry you so quickly from the coastline. You were already here."

He moved forward menacingly, and Thalicia drew her sword, muttering some spell at him. The darkness in the room shrank around the black clad man, threatening to consume and paralyze him, but he pulled from his belt the knife, slashed it across his finger tips, and suddenly the shadows dissipated. Thalicia stared, stunned by her voodoo spell being broken. "Iron; cold, hard unmalleable iron, my lady. The only thing that can stave off your treacherous sorcery. Not so dim and feeble minded as you thought, am I?"

"What in hells name are ya–?"

The man was on her before she could properly react. All she could think about was shielding Jack, and before she could blink, he had thrust the cold iron into her gut and twisted it. She gasped and gurgled, the man holding her by the throat against the cabin wall. Below them Jack began to whimper and thrash in his crib.

"I know you're going into shock, but I want you to remember this moment for me," Teach spoke against his victim's cheek. "You robbed me of him; stole my future. I know what you are, Le Sirene. Your days upon these waters in flesh are through; your slave is now free."

She gawked at him, unable to speak. Blood trickled out of her mouth as she looked wide eyed upon the cradle once more, and then fell to the floor beside it and did not move again. Blackbeard looked down at the dead woman and the weeping babe in his bed with cold eyes, then stepped over her and silently disappeared.

Jack came back to himself, breathing raggedly, a hot pain in his stomach and tears running down his face. He fell to his knees, arms wrapped around himself as if he had been mortally wounded. "You...you killed her...for nothing!" he shuddered.

"Not for nothing!" Teach retorted, standing over him. "That heathen whore stole what could have

been mine, what should have been mine!" His was wild-eyed, crazed and incensed. "But now, I have the power to undo all that which has been done. To start again!" He turned again to the Fountain behind him, filling the two cups with the glistening water, and carefully pouring into one which was inscribed; "De Vida" one of the mermaid's illusive tears.

This one he held before Jack to see; "Through you, the life I was meant to have will be achieved."

"What?" It was Angelica who spoke, for now she seemed more disheartened and disillusioned than ever at his actions. "You said it was for us!"

"Aye, I did. But I didn't say which one." he corrected before looking back at the pirate on his knees before him. "I didn't bring you here for slaughter, Sparrow. I need you, your youthful body more specifically. What happened in the cavern is just a taste of what I can do. You'll become the vessel for the greatest achievement of magic I have ever created."

Jack could only shake his head incredulously as Blackbeard's wicked plan unfolded before him. "Did you know Jack, that there is a spell, which can take a soul and twist it into something else? Someone else, actually." Teach asked, sounding delighted by the idea. "A marvelous thing. Oh it takes a great many years of work, of course, for a soul is not an easy thing to change. But when you have eternity, the limits are endless."

He grabbed Sparrow roughly by the back of the head and forced him to look in him in the eye. "That should be the last nail in that old witch's coffin. To know that I have conquered her precious bastard child and turned him into my willing pet; a vision of all his father dreamed he could be, before age and feebleness took him! A fitting punishment for your family and the wrongs you have done me!"

"I will not allow it!" Angelica shouted, bright, angry tears in her eyes. "Everything you told me was a lie! I thought you were ready to change, ready to renounce your evil ways! You promised me the world, Teach! And like a trusting fool of a girl, I believed your every word. Just as you believed mine."

He looked at her without the slightest bit of remorse for the heart he had broken; for the woman he had deceived. Jack had been right all along. "Your lies fooled no one, child." he smirked. "I always knew you were not my kin. But if it afforded me an advantage, I was not about to argue it."

She screamed bitterly and drew her rapier, rushing forward then. Jack reached to hold her back, but she was too quick. She charged Blackbeard with her sword, but he was quicker to react than she gave him credit for. He parried her thrust with his own heavy broad sword, forced her arm above her head and promptly ran her through.

A shout went up from the crew in shock, as well as Jack, who was wide eyed and gawking; "ANGELICA!"

The dying woman stared breathlessly at her murderer as he retracted his blade from her body, causing a hefty squirt of blood down the front of her corest. She fell against him limply and he caught her, easing her down onto the moss covered stone beneath them. "Poor girl," he said softly, as she gasped, "You came so far, through so much, all for your dear father. But it is not too late to save me."

Sparrow tried to move towards her, but he felt the trained guns of the Quartermaster and Gunner upon him. Blackbeard reached for the other chalice and presented it to the dying woman upon the rocks. "Angelica, no! Don't drink it!" Jack begged.

Her eyes slid from him to the man perched above her, and reached for him as he held the cup to her lips; “I did love you, Edward...”

“I know.”

He kissed her forehead and tipped the cup to her lips, and she swallowed the water. Jack bellowed again, trying to reach her, to stop her before it was too late, not wanting to see that it already was. Once she had swallowed all inside the chalice, the dark clad captain turned upon his bellowing foe, and grabbed his head roughly to hold him still. “There’s naught you can do no for her now, Sparrow. At least make her death worth something.”

He tipped the second Chalice against Jack’s lips, and Sparrow swallowed with no other choice. Choking down the salty, strange taste of the elixir, Sparrow finally broke free of Blackbeard’s grip, causing him to drop the goblet into the waters below. He hurled Teach away from him, sending him crashing against the ancient stones as he scrambled for Angelica. She reached for him, grabbing his hand; just as he felt overtaken by a sudden unnatural wind.

Fallen upon his back, Edward Teach watched in growing astonishment and delight. From the shallow waters surrounding the island began to churn and twist, lifted by the strange wind that came from nowhere into two small water spouts. The twin whirlwinds surrounded both Sparrow and Angelica as they reached for one another.

“Jack!” the bleeding woman called over the roar of it, eyes locking with his. For the first time since their reunion, Jack saw a little of the girl he had once known there.

“Angelica, this wasn’t what I wanted!” he shouted, helpless to stop what had already begun. She nodded; “I’m sorry! For everything!”

He still tried to reach for her, swept aside by the swirling vortex, but could not get passed the wall of swirling water that surrounded him. Terrified and wide eyed, he watched as it whipped about her, gruesomely tearing flesh from bone. Within seconds, the salt and water had melted her skin, and she was naught but bones stretched along the ground with bits of tattered cloth and remains of hair clinging to her. Sparrow felt the breath knocked from his lungs as something surged through him then; a coursing energy that he couldn’t describe that filled his whole being. He felt almost as if he were drowning in it; the stolen life force of the slain woman in front of him.

For a moment he was entirely engulfed by the wind and water, and then it was gone just as quickly as it had come, and he was left standing in bewilderment before the astonished crew of the Queen Anne’s Revenge. The weakness, all the pain that Blackbeard had inflicted upon him, all of it vanished, leaving only a slight dazed euphoria, tainted by shock and grief. He looked down at his skin, and saw that even the bloody etching of the triton upon his chest had vanished. He peered down into the once again placid water of the pools, and saw his reflection staring back at him in shock. He was still very much himself, but the youth of his skin had been restored, there was more fullness in his face, the lines at the corners of his eyes gone. He felt like the Jack Sparrow of fifteen long years ago, perhaps more. Before the mutiny, before Jones and the Locker, before everything. He felt alive; renewed, whole again.

“Blimey...!” Scrum gasped form somewhere in the crowd, looking at his companions. “Did you see that?! Did you see it! It works!” He clapped the gaping pirate Salaman on the back, knocking the turban clad man forward a little in his shock. Even Shandy was stunned speechless.

Jack looked from them back to the skeletal remnants of Angelica. He crouched beside her, fingers trembling as he lifted the gold crucifix from around her neck and turned it over his palm. He felt sick with regret at the sight. He had said before that she had fallen too far to save; he didn't realize that it had been true.

Behind them a laughter began to bubble, joyous but mad. Blackbeard was staring up at him as he sought to right himself, a look of pure insane joy on his face. "Look at you! Look at you! By God, the old ancient magic rings true! A beauty you were, Jack Sparrow, but now by God you are twice the man!" He opened his arms as if to embrace Jack.

And Sparrow met him with a scream of his own. "MURDERER!" He flung himself upon the man, hands tearing at his throat as though he'd tear it out. Blackbeard bellowed, grappling with the other pirate, who had renewed strength, heightened by his grief. Jack choked him brutally, trying to break his neck as he pushed him back against the rocks, and Teach's reanimated crewmen lurched forward to defend their captain.

Gunner pulled from his belt his lash and cracked it above Jack's head, breaking off a piece of the fountain stone. Sparrow rolled and narrowly avoided a second blow, forcing Teach to bare it instead. Blackbeard bellowed as the whip slashed through his heavy leather jacket, waistcoat and shirt and connected with skin, leaving only shallow wounds though it stung like hell as he bellowed in pain.

He turned and fired on Gunner for his trespass, and the Zombie was knocked backward, though he was hardly harmed by the bullet lodged in his scarred chest. He turned his gun upon Sparrow then, only to see the man reaching for Angelica's fallen sword. Teach discarded his pistol and reached for his own sword, waving the heavy steel sharply, which sent the rapier spinning from Sparrow's hands. "This is going to be a very long and difficult life for you, Sparrow, if you don't stop FIGHTING ME!" He gave another sharp wave of the Sword of Triton that sent Jack hurling backwards through the air. He collided sharply with the stone steps where the discarded satchel had been thrown, along with it's forgotten contents and laid sprawled upon them, knocked senseless by the blow.

Blackbeard started towards him, his joyous mood over shadowed by Jack's violent reaction. But there was still time to salvage the moment. He reached to grab the unmoving man, when a shout came from beyond the huddled crew.

"BLACKBEARD!"

He turned, startled, and saw beyond his men a new figure had appeared; and not alone. A man in a blue naval coat, weathered, bearded face glowering at him, bright eyes like hot coals staring him down as he hobbled forward on one leg, his sword thrust out in front of him, the blade pointing at Teach's heart. "If ye so much as lay a single finger upon that man again, God help you, I'll have your head!"

Teach rose slowly, staring at the realization that before him stood the very thing he had been running from this whole time; The One Legged Man had come at last. It took a moment, but as the man drew nearer, uninhibited by the crew, he realized that his face was familiar to him.

"Captain Barbossa?"

"Admiral now," Hector snarled. "Didn't expect to see me again in this life time, did you?"

Teach stepped over Jack's fallen figure, making his way towards his challenger. Suddenly his fear was gone. Barbossa was old, feeble and obviously handicapped. What chance did he have against his strength, his power? If he had known all along that this was the devil that was after his life, he would not have been so quick to flee.

But Blackbeard did not know the true nature of the man he was dealing with, and his under estimation of the old pirate's skill would cost him. "Have you come alone, Admiral?" he inquired silkily.

"No, he hasn't." Groves spoke suddenly, appearing through the strange shroud of mist that covered the true opening of the cave, his sword at the ready. He stood firmly at Barbossa's side, proud to be there; "If you challenge him, you challenge all of us." More men began to appear behind him as well, and this made the crew of the Queen Anne's Revenge feel ill at ease. Victory was not so easily won after all.

But Blackbeard was not so inclined to agree. Everything as he saw it was falling perfectly into place. "Do you threaten me?" he asked, gripping his ethereal and powerful sword in his palm, certain he would overcome. He brought down his sword brutally towards Hector, thinking that it would send him flying backwards. But instead the Admiral's cutlass clashed with his, and Teach found to his surprise that his own blade was painfully forced backwards, and he had to redouble his grip upon it. "Edward Teach! I've come to claim revenge! For my ship, for my crew, for one twisted right leg–!" He gave the saber a brutal thrust forward and to his great astonishment Teach was knocked back a step or two as Hector slashed at him again and just narrowly missed taking off his head. Leaning hard into the man, only the quivering steel of their swords and the strength of their arms separating them, Barbossa glared into Teach's dark, startled eyes; "And for the man I love, and the harm you've done him."

As this statement rang true in Teach's mind, his shock faded and his rage took over again. He bellowed angrily and flung Barbossa back, seeing now his spells would not work on the man; a disadvantage he was not willing to accept, the old coward. He must be wearing something to protect himself, whether he knew it or not. He swung the heavy broad sword wildly, and this time Hector was forced to recoil. "KILL THEM!" the Captain bellowed to his crew. The Zombies lurched forward, eager to have a taste of the battle against the unwitting Englishmen who stood against them, unaware mere bullets and sabers could not stop them. Only a few of Blackbeard's living crew started forward, the rest looking frightened and torn. There was no where they could run, and it soon became obvious that they must fight or die, either by the hands of the zombie crewmen or the navy.

The ancient cave filled the echoes of gun fire and clashing metal, screams of the living and the howls of the dead and damned. Teach was intrigued by his opponent, who was surprisingly agile on his one remaining leg, aided by peg foot and crutch. Still he swung his sword like a true master, and none of Teach's conventional dirty tricks of gaining the upper hand would abide him now. He searched Barbossa's person for what could be disrupting his voodoo power, but nothing became apparent.

Hector slashed at him madly, clouting the man with the broad end of his sword once or twice across the arm, but failed to fell the sharp bit of the poisoned blade across him. All it would take was a scratch, but Blackbeard was formidable, and would not let him land a single blow.

The two men dueled mightily, but Groves was right at Hector's elbow, presenting yet another

sword edge for Teach to contend against, and doing too thorough a job of keeping his own men at bay. “Gunner!” the black beared pirate bellowed. “Deal with him!”

He made a mad swipe at Groves that caused the younger man to go staggering backwards, shoulder bleeding from where the tip of the broad sword had caught him. He’d barely time to regain himself when out of the corner of his eye he saw the big hulking, undead Haitian come lumbering towards him, his deadly whip swinging around his head. It cracked down across Groves’ sword arm, curled around it and yanked him brutally forward. He yelped in surprise, watching as the scarred and lumbering brute raise his own short sword and made as if to hack Groves cleanly in half with it. The young Lieutenant was just barely quick enough to raise his weapon and managed to block the blow, though it forced him to his knees.

“Theodore!” Hector called, but was too engaged with Blackbeard to break free, even for a moment. Groves thought that surely he would be finished, unable to keep Gunner’s crushing weight from slicing down on him, when there was a pistol crack and a bullet ripped through the Zombie’s already marred face. He howled in rage and teetered away, half his skull blown wide.

Groves looked around wide eyed and found Gillette running to his side. “Giulliam...” he grinned gratefully.

“Always looking after you, aren’t I?” the smaller man chuckled, extending his hand and pulling Groves to his feet as the two charged forward, bringing the howling Gunner to his knees.

Hector allowed himself a smirk of relief seeing that at least one of his lovers was out of harms way. But the other remained unmoving upon the island above, and Barbossa had no idea if he was either living or dead. “Jack! Jack, answer me ye blighter!” But no sound came from the fallen man above them. “Sparrow!” he called again, more urgently than before. “Come on, Jack...” His stomach twisted into a worried knot and he felt sick with it. It couldn’t end like this.

“He can neither hear nor, save you, old man!” Teach retorted, hacking at the other pirate in an attempt to knock him off his feet, but Hector was surprisingly agile. “The Jack Sparrow you knew is lost!”

The thought alone spurred him to madness, and he came at Blackbeard like a storm, matching him blow for blow, his sword a flash of silver in the dim light of the cavern. The dark haired pirate struggled just for a breath between the two of them, stunned, perhaps even impressed by the ferocity in Barbossa’s attack, as it was taking every breath of his own just to keep his head. But he could see something that Hector couldn’t; that he was weary, and getting more exhausted with each attack. “You’re beaten, Teach! Surrender now and I’ll kill ye quickly!”

“You really think you can defeat me, old man? You can not even catch your breath!” Blackbeard mocked, baring his teeth, eyes agleam, cold and unhinged. Barbossa made another ploy to cut him, this time trying to strike him low across the legs. But Teach caught the low thrust with the flat end of his blade, and flung it harshly upward. In a brief, terrifying moment Hector was completely exposed, and wide eyed he watched as Blackbeard swung at him, certain he’d cleave him in two. But he was already too exhausted to derive anything but a deep feeling of unhappiness about it.

Blackbeard made to swing, then something collided with his head from behind, knocking his hat

off and making him stagger forward, swinging low rather than high, and caught only the lower part of Barbossa's crutch. Both men fumbled, Hector falling hard upon his back with a yell, and Blackbeard, knocked against a protruding rock, turned to see what had assaulted him.

From the island he could see a new figure, small but brave, standing boldly near where Sparrow had fallen. It was the Cabin Boy, Shandy. "Leave him alone, Captain butt-face!" the blonde youth spat, spewing the only insult his adolescent mind could muster. Blackbeard looked down, wondering what on earth the child had struck him with, and his eyes widened in sudden intelligible horror.

Shandy, small and wiry for his age, had been all too easily able to slip away during the beginning of the conflict, eager to reach the pirate he had come to look to as a hero, perhaps even a father figure on this long and dangerous voyage. Seeing Jack's brave struggle after Angelica's murder had spurred the boy to action, where he had previously stood transfixed in terror.

Now amongst the brawling buccaneers surrounding him, he managed to make his way to Sparrow, finding him unconscious upon the stairs, but gratefully still alive. From this safe vantage point, he had watched Blackbeard's struggle with the valiant Naval Admiral, whom seemed to hate the pirate as much as he did, and his Captain was far from playing fair.

He needed something to give him an advantage, and barely able to hold a sword and knowing little to nothing about hand-to-hand combat; Shandy fell back on his one true talent; his uncanny skill for being able to throw anything with deadly speed and accuracy.

If only there was something...

It was then that he noticed a curious object dangling from Jack's belt. Barely registering the true nature of the strange shriveled orb in his hands, he stood and hurled it with all his strength at Teach's head, knocking his hat clean off.

Teach boggled at the sight that now greeted him from the swampy floor of the ancient cavern. He recognized her, even in this strange and twisted form; the head of Thalicia Sparrow bobbed before him. "YOU!" he shrieked at the shriveled thing; hands quivering, practically salivating like a mad dog. "Loathsome wench! Evil temptress of the sea! Have you come at last for my blood?!"

No one quite new what madness had overcome their leader, but it was that moment that made both Salaman and Scrum decide that it was not worth dying for a mad man, and quickly the two changed sides, now helping the overwhelmed British to deal with the overwhelming surge of zombies. Salaman swung his saber in a deadly arch, and beheaded one as it stumbled towards it's wounded foe. It fell, finally lifeless once more as the other men stare. "The heads man! You have to cut off the head!" he bellowed to the gaping Groves and Gillette, who were eager to comply.

"Thank you friend!" Theodore bellowed, doing like wise to another lurching undead mariner as it tried to curl it's eel like arms around his throat. "Rest assured, it won't be forgotten!"

"Is that the word of an Englishman?" Scrum called, spearing another through the chest before kicking it down and off with it's head too. Theodore grinned, "No! The word of a pirate!"

Gillette seemed about to retort, when he was abruptly caught upon the end of one of the still opposing pirate's cutlass. The blade tore across his chest in a wide, arch, and he had barely time gasp before a knife was in his back.

"Guilliam!" Groves shouted, turning and shooting his comrade's murderer before reaching for the fallen man. "Guilliam, no!" But Gillette, looking at him with wide eyes, that had always seemed to know that this would be his end, said nothing and died without another word. Groves' hands shook as he let him slide into the water below, a hot nauseated feeling filling his throat. He was knocked aside then as another dueling pair pushed past him, and was shaken from his grief and shock by the sound of Blackbeard shrieking at something upon the ground, and Barbossa, struggling to get to his feet.

It was all this shrieking that finally roused Jack from his stupor upon the steps. Blinking, the first thing that came into focus was his compass, lying close with in reach, it's needle idly spinning this way and that as if blown by the wind.

He reached for it out of reflex, and as his fingers curled around it, he found another darker pair curled around his. Eyes turning up, he saw for a moment the woman from Teach's memory, only more beautiful, smiling at him. "Iron, Jackie. Iron is the key."

"Mum...?"

When he blinked she was gone, but he was still holding the compass, and set of pale, dirty hands was clutching his collar, shaking him worriedly. "Captain Jack! You're not dead!"

He looked up into boy's gleeful face and patted it gently as he struggled upward; "Not yet, lad." Shandy pulled him to his feet, and Jack re-laced his faithful compass upon his belt and picked up his sword, moving steadily towards Teach's shrieking form below.

"Sea witch! Heathen bride of Satan!" He raised his sword to stab at the head below, and then gasped in sheer terror when it's sown eyes suddenly ripped open, staring at him and it leapt up like a hot coal from a fire and attached itself it his arm, the barbed stakes thrust into it's lips embedding themselves into his skin. Teach screamed, tearing the thing away as it ripped wide, jagged bloody lines through his arm and hurled it into the recesses of the cavern to be lost among the rocks and vines. The ruby red droplets splattered upon the watery ground below, tinging it red, and the metallic smell of it sent a thrill through Teach's body.

It was this distraction that finally gave Barbossa the upper hand he'd been needing. Struggling upward with the aid of the boulder he'd fallen behind, no longer assisted by his crutch, he made to stab at the only bit of Teach he could reach; his knee. He made to drive the blade home, hoping to take the whole leg, but it's tip barely slashed his skin before the evil bokor turned, wild eyed, muttering something in a gruff native tongue.

Hector's sword ripped itself from his hand and went spinning away. Teach gave a wave of his sword, and his foe shouted as he was suddenly flung up into the air and sent crashing down again

with a splash and a sputtered.

“Sir!” Groves cried, running towards him.

Teach paid him no mind, for whatever Barbossa had been protected with was now gone. He looked upon the ground and saw the ruined remains of his cloven crutch, and the culprit. “An iron-shod foot?” he chuckled, kicking away the broken end of the staff. “Clever. But not clever enough.”

“Stay where you are!” Groves barked, raising his pistol, keen upon shooting Blackbeard through the head if he should lift a finger to harm Hector further. There was a thundering crack and a puff of smoke and the quick, burning smell of freshly fired gunpowder. Blackbeard blinked, expecting to feel himself pierced by a pistol ball.

Instead it was Groves who was bleeding, his hand going to the swiftly spreading blood stain just above his naval. He dropped to his knees as Barbossa cried out, reaching for him; “THEODORE!” The shot had come behind, and they turned now to see that this had become more than a battle between pirates and Englishmen.

“One less threat to his majesty’s crown.” The infamous Spaniard stepped from the shadows of the cavern’s shrouded entrance, his officers standing at the ready at his elbows as the rest of his crew quickly and discretely surrounding the feuding factions in front of them. “You are all here by placed under arrest for piracy and as enemies of the crown of his royal Majesty King Ferdinand! Any who wish NOT to be killed, surrender now, and I will show you mercy.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Scrum bellowed, his shirt bloodied and sweat dripping down his face. The Spainard looked at him in distaste and replied; “I am Adalvino Allessandro Aldano Amalio–!”

His glorious title was again cut short, for another shot rang out and rendered him speechless; a bullet hole in his chest. He looked up, pale and gawking at Jack Sparrow, who had descended into the chaos below, perched upon a rock, holding his still smoking pistol and muttered bitterly;“Your name is too bloody long.”

The Spaniard gawked at him a moment longer, then fell face first into the water and did not move again. Jack leapt down from the rock, taking advantage of the shock and chaos and knelt beside Groves, who slumped against him. “Hang in there, mate!”

“Jack...? You’re not hurt?” the palid, gasping young man managed, and grinned his teeth stained pink with blood. Jack felt a deep sinking dread in his stomach, easing the man to the ground. “I’m glad...”

“Hush, luv, don’t talk, everything will be fine...”

“Jack! Groves!”

Both looked up at Barbossa, who was trying to crawl towards them, but Jack had no more than extended an arm to the man when he was ripped backwards and flung once more painfully against the rocks. Blackbeard snarled at them; “Enough interruptions!”

He turned his blade upon the ceiling above, muttering hurriedly under his breath. Above them, the stalagmites began to quiver and shake above the unsuspecting heads of the Spaniards, and they barely had time to cry out as the rocks began to rain down upon them, crushing them beneath their weight. The cavern quivered and shook as Blackbeard bellowed with insane laughter, hardly aware of the poison already coursing through him.

The surviving interlopers fled into the recesses of the cave, the deserting pirates along with them, either in hopes of escape or the chance for more blood shed, it was uncertain. Teach ignored them, for their fates mattered little to him as if they were mere bothersome insects to be swatted at. Feeling a quivering in his limbs, but unaware of it's origins, he turned upon his stunned prey. Barbossa was fumbling towards his sword again, his face bloodied from the last collision with the stone, wet hair hanging in his eyes. He was a pitiful, desperate sight in his stubbornness to defeat him.

Teach kicked him out of spite, knocking him flat upon his back in the water again with a groan and stepped upon his groping hand, grinding it under his boot heel and eliciting a delicious painful shout from the man in response. "Brave though you are, Admiral, your efforts are for naught! I have my prize at last!"

Barbossa ignored him, turning his head instead towards where Jack and Groves lingered. "Groves! Groves, listen to me, damn you! Don't you dare die!"

"Sir..." came the Lieutenant feeble and strained response. "Sir, I'm sorry...I can not move..." Jack attempted to comfort him, only to find himself suddenly hoisted into the air by the thick, fleshy arms of the Quartermaster, who had been lumbering towards him in the chaos, bidden by his master. He wrapped his arms around the pirate's chest and carried him, thrashing and kicking towards Blackbeard's side. "Put me down! Put me down ye great lump of beastly flesh!"

"Bring him here, Quartermaster. It is only fitting to have him by my side in this moment." the Captain grinned as Jack was dropped roughly in front of him. He made to reach for Barbossa and Teach gave him a warning tap from the flat line of his blade. "No, no. None of that." he scolded him. He waved his free hand, and Jack felt only the faintest tingling of that familiar dark presence trying to seep into his mind once more. But it could not reach him; not this time. The compass's simple iron needle had provided an effective barrier between him and the spell. But Teach did not know this. In fact, he was not at all aware that Jack was not completely under his control. And Sparrow knew that this was an advantage that must be pressed to it's utmost, or it would be the doom of them all.

"Teague, my darling, just what did you think we should do with this pathetic old fool?" Teach asked sweetly as Hector stared bug eyed and gasping up at him. "'Teague'?" he repeated, much to his disgust. He had no idea what sort of sick thing he had just walked into, but it made him shiver, though hardly as much as the next words out of Jack's mouth; "I think we should kill him."

Teach put an arm around him, toying with his hair. "An excellent suggestion," he all but purred, loving the horrified look upon Barbossa's face. "But I don't think it's enough. I want his years, my love. Every one that has been, every one that would be." He smirked at the man before him; "And that does appear to be a great many, doesn't it?"

"Fuck you!"

In response, Blackbeard gave a little wave of his finger across Hector's chest, and in result a red bloody line appeared as surely as though he'd been slashed with a knife. Barbossa cried out, clutching the wound, blood dripping through his fingers. Blackbeard seemed keen to go on watching the other man suffer, but felt a sickness in his stomach and a growing weakness in his arms and legs. He faltered a little, and Hector laid gasping in the water, looking from Jack to Groves, who had fallen completely and was watching them with sad helpless eyes.

"I am in a bewilderment," Teach panted. "What's come over me?"

“I’ve poisoned ye,” Hector barked. “I’m sorry to say it’ll be a swift end, but a painful at least!” Blackbeard paled a little, leaning heavily upon Sparrow, who now eased him against the rock. “Teague, time is short...we must perform the ritual one last time.” He handed Jack the vial with the remaining tear inside and motioned towards the Fountain. Jack turned silently and went to fill them.

“Jack! Jack!” Hector called after him, hoping some how to reach his love through the haze of the spell Teach had upon him. Blackbeard snarled at him; “He will not heed you! He’s mine now, as it should have always been!”

Hector had endured many a hopeless, bleak moment in his life, but this by far felt the most painful. Bleeding and crippled, he could do nothing but lay there beneath his enemy’s boot while one lover lay dying, and the other was subjugated to the villain’s will.

Tears in his eyes, he looked to Groves; “Theodore! Can you still hear me, darlin’?”

“Yes, sir...” came the feeble reply. “But I feel so cold...”

“Keep your wits, love! It’ll be alright! We’re not finished yet, you and I, I promise ye!”

From his fallen position, Theodore smiled at him; “It’s been an honor serving with you, sir...a privilege. The very greatest of my life...”

Barbossa felt the hot, salty sting of more tears collecting in his eyes and in the back of his throat as he repressed a sob; “Stop it now, will ye! You’re not going to die!” He angrily blinked away his tears; “Theodore I love you!”

No answer came, the boy was still. “Groves! Groves!”

Blackbeard twisted his boot against his hand to bring the weeping man’s attention back, “Don’t worry, Admiral. You’ll be together soon.”

Jack was returning from the island, his expression completely impassive, seemingly unaware of the sorrow and hopelessness around him. He handed Teach one of the Chalices; and the old villain was feeling too superior and too confident in his victory to even see which one it was. “It’s almost over now, Teague. We’ll be together, for always.”

“Just as you wish, luv.” Jack answered. To Hector’s sickening dismay, his lover smiled and leaned in to kiss the man. “Jack Sparrow, I know you’re in there! Don’t let this blood drinking bastard take what he wants from ye without a fight!”

Blackbeard looked at him, irritated that his moment had been interrupted. “Give him the Chalice, my love. See that he drinks every last drop.”

“Of course, Captain.”

Jack moved and knelt beside Barbossa in the water, lifting him securely with one hand to hold him up while the other presented him the Chalice. Hector looked at him fearfully, and then their eyes met. Jack winked at him and mouthed; “Trust me.”

He tipped the cup to Barbossa's lips and watched him drink. Teach, though the poison was beginning to blur his vision and caused his heart to race, stood triumphantly and downed his own before tossing the Chalice away and spreading his arms victoriously. "Yes! At last! Victory is mine!"

"I don't bloody think so," Jack said sharply then, much to Teach's great surprise. Sparrow was still kneeling beside Barbossa, holding before him the empty cup which read "De Vida" in his palm. "I may have 'accidentally' switched the cups."

Teach's heart plummeted into the pits of his stomach; and the sweet taste of victory turned to ashen defeat upon his tongue. "No...not possible!" he sputtered, trembling all over. "My spell! It's absolute, you could not have–!"

Jack dangled his compass before the man; "Iron, mate. A little trick I learned from an old friend of mine." He reached down, grabbed Barbossa's fallen sword, took the handle in both hands and drove it forward with stunning speed and precision into Blackbeard's guts. Teach gurgled, impaled upon the poisonous blade as Jack glared up into his wide, wounded eyes. "That's for my mother." He twisted it, and Teach spat blood. "And that's for everything else."

He yanked the cutlass out again and Blackbeard dropped like a stone, not yet dead, but dying none the less. Barbossa called out to him as the mysterious wind began to pick up again and the water around them began to writhe and churn.

"No...!" Teach groaned, his voice a dying gurgle. "No!" He tried one last time to grasp at Sparrow, but he was completely obscured by the wall of water that now surrounded him as if he stood in the eye of hurricane. The water tore and whipped at his skin, and he cast his gaze up one last time and saw a figure standing over him within the wall; Thalicia. "Time to collect upon your debts, Teach. Woe to you, they are many!"

"No! NO! NOOO!"

They barely heard the man's screams over the wind, and when it at last died and Jack could look up again, Blackbeard the pirate was nothing more than bones and tattered rags of leather upon the mossy ground.

Sparrow turned, the grisly image forgotten and looked worriedly upon Barbossa, who was lying on his side in the water. "Hector!" he lifted the man, his face lolling against Jack's shoulder. This was a very different Hector, however. One that resembled strikingly the beautiful red haired man who had become his first mate upon the Black Pearl. The grey strands of his hair were banished, there was nothing but flame red and strands of blonde, and the lines and wrinkles that Jack had come to love were made smooth again. But some things had not vanished with the Fountain's magic. The tear shaped scar beneath Hector's eye remained, and his peg leg was just as it had been. There were some things that even time could not heal he supposed.

Barbossa opened his eyes again, blinking into Jack's worried face. "Jack?"

Sparrow smiled, eyes watering and kissed him hard, clutching him close. "You beautiful old bastard! There isn't anything that can actually keep you down longer than a moment, is there?" he laughed, almost hysterical with relief. Barbossa looked at him inquisitively, still feeling dazed then caught a glimpse at his own hand and barely recognized it. "By Gods...!"

There was a growing rumble within the cavern then, and Jack turned to look back over his shoulder towards the island and saw the circular stones of the Fountain begin to crack and shudder as the water below their feet began to surge as if with a sudden flood. “I think we’ve overstayed our welcome,” Sparrow nodded, climbing to his feet and taking Hector with him, half carrying him. But Barbossa struggled; “Groves!”

Jack turned, looking back towards the young man’s fallen body and his heart twisted painfully. “There’s naught we can do for him now, luv.” he shook his head, but still Barbossa fought him. “No! No, I won’t leave him here!”

“Hector, he’s gone!” He gripped the man tighter, now carrying him fully as the water rose above his knees and turned to the frightened remainder of the two factions. “Anyone who does not wish to die here, follow me!”

Scrum, Salaman, Shandy, and those surviving members of Barbossa’s crew and the pirates charged forward back towards the swirling mist of the cave portal just as a wave of flood waters surged forward, washing them all off their feet.

Carried by the tide, they found themselves flushed through the opening and spilled upon the sunlit rocks of the cavern mouth on the other side, coughing and sputtering. But their deliverance was not yet realized. Though they had escaped the perils of the Fountain of Youth, a new danger was in front of them on the rocks, where the lingering Spaniards were doing battle against Gibbs and his dozen or so crewmen.

“Jack!”

The old sailor looked up from his fire arm long enough to catch a glimpse of his Captain and the Admiral as they struggled forward, sopping wet. Shooting as he went, he rushed to meet them, for Jack seemed to be dragging Hector along. “About time you two showed up! I was beginning to think the worst–!” He looked in surprise at Jack and Hector’s stunningly youthful faces and for a moment was stunned speechless; “By the powers, man!”

“No time for compliments, help me with ‘im!” he grunted, as he and Gibbs both got their arms under Barbossa and carried him between them as they fled, calling for retreat from their following. The entire cavern was flooding, filling the shallow Jungle Pools and threatening to drown the entire valley. The rag-tag band of surviving sailors scrambled up the hillside and finally came to rest there, as the danger seemed at last to ebb along with the flood waters.

Gibbs, Jack and Hector fell upon the grass, all huffing and puffing, drenched with both water and sweat. “What happened in there, Captain?” Gibbs asked finally when he had enough wind to speak. Sparrow shook his head, uncertain how to string it all together yet. “A tale for the ages, my old friend.” he spoke at last with a wry smile, smoothing back Barbossa’s damp hair from his face. It was kinder that Hector was senseless for the moment, for Jack had seen the heartbreak in his eyes when they had left Groves behind. “But it’ll keep for a few hours, I think.”

“Captain Jack!”

Sparrow looked up as Shandy came bounding up the hill and launched himself into the pirate’s arms, knocking him flat upon the ground. “You did it, sir! You did it! Blimey it was brilliant, the clever way you tricked ‘im!”

“Aye, stroke of genius it was.” Scrum said in what he hoped was an admiring and apologetic tone,

humbling wringing his ruined hat between his palms. Jack looked at the dripping survivors; his sheep, looking for a shepherd. “Well, I am rather clever.” the tan skinned pirate smirked.

“Could such a genius be using a crew?”

Gibbs and Jack exchanged careful glances. They’d certainly taken on worse in the past. “Come along lads, I think we’ve all had enough for one day. Back to the Bay, to fetch ourselves a ship.” They cheered, and Jack waved Gibbs on to gather the rest and lead them back the way they had come, leaving him alone with Hector.

He stretched beside him in the damp grass, and the blue eyed man looked up at him, mute and mournful. “I abandoned him.”

“No,” Sparrow shook his head firmly, “You could have done nothing more for him, Hector.” he assured, pulling the other man into his arms and holding him tightly. “He knew you loved him.” Barbossa shuddered and sobbed against him for a time, torn between relief and regret, and Jack kept him close until at last it passed and they stood together on the hill, looking at the drenched and ruined landscape in front of them, and the dead scattered about it.

“So much for The Fountain of Youth,” Jack scoffed, feeling his own face as he peered at his reflection in a puddle. “I look the same.”

Hector caught a glimpse of his own face and was startled. “Hmmm, the looks of a twenty year old.” He mused, scratching his chin, almost missing the lines and wrinkles that he had become so accustomed to. “And the disposition of a seventy year old,” Jack gibbed, trying to bring a smile to his face. Hector put an arm around him to steady himself, as his crutch was now lost among the ruins. “Stolen years, was it? I’ve Blackbeard’s, of course, but who...?”

Jack cast his eyes downward, reaching into his pocket and finding Angelica’s cross there. Hector nodded in understanding. “It was not your doing.”

“No. But it doesn’t change the bitter taste of it.” his lover replied. Hector tried to comfort him, when the gleam of something in the mid day sun caught his eye. “What be that?” he asked, pointing towards one of the pools on the slope of the rocks near the waterfall. Jack squinted and then saw it to. Something was standing out from the water, caught in the crag of a rock. They approached it together, as Jack had to act as Barbossa’s other leg, moving in for a closer look.

Barbossa recognized the blade trapped within the rocks as the one that had nearly killed him just minutes ago. Without Teach’s dark influence upon it, the broadsword seemed to have a brighter sheen about it, glistening with water. Hector reached for it and pulled it from it’s resting place, balancing it in his hand. It was a good fit. “The mermaids will be keen to see this.” he noted.

“Mermaids!” Jack gasped then. “The whelp!”

“What?”

“The bloody missionary and his fish tailed wench! I forgot–!”

“Calm yourself, they’re fine.” Hector chided. “Young Philip Swift and his siren are long gone from here by now, I can assure you, and never was he safer than in her arms.” he nodded. Jack looked a little sad, “Oh...well, that’s good I suppose. Although, I think I’ll miss that do-gooding young man, I will.”

“Aye.”

Something bobbed there in the water before them then, and Jack knelt to scoop it up. It was Blackbeard’s hat, washed out with the tide. All that remained of the nefarious Edward Teach. “I know someone that should have this.” he said thoughtfully then.

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Following the flood waters down stream, the weary group found a trail which lead them to Blackbeard’s secret cove, in which the Queen Anne’s Revenge had remained carefully hidden beyond the rocks of Whitecap Bay, and reached it in half the time of the previous journey.

Scrum strummed his water-logged mandolin and sang in great verse the praises and bravery of Captain Jack and Barbossa and of their defeat of the villain Blackbeard. Liberated from their servitude from the evil man, his surviving crew members seemed cheered and jubilant, for once a bright future ahead of them, even if the powers and potential riches of the Fountain had been lost. But Jack and Hector hardly spoke a word along the march, both burdened heavily by knowledge they had gained, and the people that had been left behind.

Upon reaching the beach, Scrum and his followers, for the nit-wit had developed a queer sort of following among the group, made to retrieve the ship from her hiding place; along with the supervision of Gibbs of course, who was not about to be marooned here by a bunch of twats who thought they could crew the massive galleon with naught but twelve people.

While Hector rested, staring wistfully out into the ocean, Jack rummaged for short sturdy tree branches and a bit of twine which he used to make two crosses, and stuck them into the stand. “What are you doing?” his lover ventured after a time of watching him in silence.

“We have no bodies to commend to the sea, or the ground,” Jack muttered, wedging the wood as deep as it would go, estimating the distance of the waterline at high tide so that they would not be washed away. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t make some sort of memorial.”

He took Angelica’s cross from his pocket and draped it over the cross, and made a mournful face when he had nothing to place over Groves’ marker. He felt that he had barely begun to know the brave young Luietenant who had somehow always been lurking in the background of his life, but his sorrow was for the fact that his life had been snuffed out so prematurely, much like poor James Norrington, and the hole that it left in Hector’s heart. The young man had meant a great deal to him apparently. Hector did not throw around the word “love” lightly.

“That be mighty fine of ye,” his lover nodded then appreciatively as Jack came to join him upon the shore, watching the tide as it began its inland decent, staring at the dark clouds of silt turned up with the waves as it was washed along the beach. Barbossa put his hand in the sand and felt the water wash it from beneath his fingers and palms, reclaiming it for its own. Tears stung his eyes again, but they did not fall, as the wind brushed them aside. “Is everything I love in this damn world condemned or doomed in some wretched manner?” he muttered into his palm, gritting his teeth as he bit back a sob. Jack knelt behind him and put his arms around his shoulders, hugging

him close. Hector leaned back into him, reaching a hand back and digging it into Jack's dark hair, bringing his face down against his. "At least I am spared you, m'love."

"You'll always have me."

There came then a slithering among the water that caught their eye. Flowing in with the tide like a sea serpent, one of the mermaids that the two pirates had encountered earlier came gliding up to them along the glass-smooth sand and sea foam laden tide. It was the golden haired creature, with the large luminous blue eyes whom had so lustfully kissed Jack and given Hector words of caution during their brief encounters in Whitecap Bay.

She laid upon her belly in the surf, lifting herself up on her hands as she positioned herself between Barbossa's legs, staring at them both intensely, "The deed has been done?" She did not seem surprised by the Admiral's or the Captain's altered appearances, but then again not much was able to surprise an immortal.

Trying to avert his eyes, lest he fall under her spell, Barbossa looked at the sand and fumbled in his belt for the sword he had retrieved from the battle ground, as Jack kept a wary grip on both the other man's shoulder and his pistol, just in case. "The Sword of Triton, as promised, m'lady." He offered, extending it to her on flattened palms. Balancing herself on her strong fish-like lower half, the merwoman turned into a sitting position and took the weapon in her hands, holding the broad blade with surprising ease. "An oath fulfilled." She smiled at them in gratitude and pulled both men, one after the other, into a hungry kiss that left them both flushed and stammering a bit afterwards. "Ever you have proven yourselves worthy of our trust, Captains. Our eternal gratitude you have earned. But what has become of our sister?"

"Fallen in love, I'm afraid." Jack answered. "Saved by a man she then rescued in turn. Has she not returned to you?" he inquired then, feeling a twinge of worry that some harm may have yet befallen Phillip and the mermaid. She absorbed this new information, internalizing it. Often her people mated with human men, for it was their primary means of reproduction. And there had been occasions where a mermaid had fallen in love with a human. But it had always ended rather tragically for either one party or the other.

"Then she has made her choice." she nodded thoughtfully, almost sadly, for it must have seemed to her as if she was lost to their collective forever. She looked at them again, "You may sail safely these waters, and no harm will come to you by our people. Until we meet again."

She slid back into the surf and was gone with the foam, and they saw no more of her but a flash of her glittering tale in the waves.

It took two hours and a total of twenty five men to get The Queen Anne underway and ready to set sail. Once a massive slaver ship, she would require many more crewmen, but for now they made do with their rabble of survivors, even a few deserting Spanish soldiers. Jack helped Hector limp to the helm, allowing him to stand freely at the wheel. Hector looked upon it with trepidation, and Jack smiled encouragingly. "She's yours, by the Code, Admiral. Sail her well."

Barbossa smiled and gripped one of the rods in his palm, the thrill of command washing over him again. The Queen Anne would be feared again upon the high seas, but for a different purpose now. He reached into his vest pocket, finding inside the damp leather bound letters of commission by the king. He sighed ruefully, hearing the parchment flap and crackle a bit in the wind as he looked at Sparrow. “So much for an easy life.” He promptly shredded the thing, casting the pieces to the winds, freeing himself of the bonds of his duties to king and country, and all the pardons for his crimes attached.

“Where to, Admiral?” Sparrow asked lazily, leaning upon the rail, Teach’s hat still fixed to his belt as a trophy. Hector pondered for a moment, then nodded firmly. “Tortuga.”

“Aye. Tortuga.”

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Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once it had grown dark, and the last little bit of orange red sunset had long disappeared behind them, Jack retired to the cabin to wait for Hector. Barbossa had fallen easily into command aboard the ship, and no one dared to question him. Sparrow couldn't deny that the man had always been made to lead rather than follow, and it reminded him of his own blindness and arrogance in the their days passed. But that felt like a life time ago, perhaps more. He felt no threat to his own station watching Barbossa take command, for the Queen Anne was not his to govern and he felt no need to interfere. Besides, it was a much needed distraction.

He never thought he would enter willingly into this room again, and had been systematically deposing of all it's darkest trophies and anything he thought my still contain some lingering dark magic, smashing it and then chucking it out into the sea. By the time Hector came to join him, he was sitting in Blackbeard's chair, carefully admiring his captive ship within in the bottle. Barbossa stared at the strange, betwitched object in his hand for a few moments before limping closer. "By the powers..."

"Just as I said. Safe and sound. More or less." Jack nodded, tipping the bottle ever so slightly so that the could watch his crew scramble across the deck. "I've been watching your two favorite twats go at it like rabbits for an hour or more. It's even more disturbing in miniature form..." he noted, speaking of course of Pintel and Ragetti.

"How are you going to get her out again?" Hector asked.

"Haven't worked that out yet. But I'll think of something." Carefully he put her down again and moved to help Barbossa out of his clothes. There came a knock on the door then, and there appeared in the crack of it the unruly blonde head of Shandy, who looked nervously from one man to the next, something bundled in his arms. "Captain Jack?"

"Come in boy, don't lurk."

Hector seemed slightly stunned by the sight of the boy, even more so that Jack seemed on friendly terms with him. "I found these down in the hold, sir." he looked shyly towards Barbossa. "Mister Swift, he saved 'em for ye, I think."

The two men looked skeptically down at the heap, realizing that it was a bundle of clothes, and an old, black wide brimmed hat, adorned with wilting feathers. Hector's hat. Barbossa snatched it by the old tattered brim and held it up carefully. "I never thought I'd see this old thing again." He placed it neatly atop his head, tipping it back slightly in the manner he was most accustomed to. Shandy admired it appreciatively. "It suits you, Admiral, it does."

Jack smiled at him proudly, flicking the drooping feather playfully. "Aye, that it does, lad. That it does."

“And what be your name, son?”

“Joseph Chandanganc. Known to most as Shandy, sir.” the fair haired boy nodded with a salute. Hector and Jack looked curiously from one to the other. “Never had a cabin boy before,” Hector mumbled, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

“Well, you’ll never find more brave, useful or loyal a lad as young Mr. Chandanganc here. Highly recommended, I hear. A proper pirate in the making.” Jack replied, noting the boy’s beaming and hopeful face at his recommendation. “Not to mention a possessor of a rather clever and deadly throwing arm.” He winked at the boy, who winked back. Shandy snapped his fingers then and reached into the oversized pocket of his vest; “I nearly forgot, I did!”

From it he plucked the fist sized blackened and shriveled head of Jack’s mother, noting that one of the stakes that had protruded from her sealed lips had broken off, left inside Blackbeard. “I thought you might want her back, Captain.”

Jack took the remains gently, smiling a little at them. “There you are,” he fixed it back to his belt securely and gave it loving pat upon the head. “Good to have you back, mum.”

After the boy had departed, leaving the two old shipmates once more alone, the mood took on a sullen tone. Redressed, and his leg rebound in a clean bandage, the hefty peg temporarily removed, Hector sat upon the bed, staring up at the long, glaring stain glass window at the back of the cabin, lit by the lantern that dangled from the ship’s stern. The image, gory and fearsome, a depiction of Hell and burning skeletons, reaching towards some ethereal light above, made them both uneasy.

Jack couldn’t properly look at the thing, and kept his back to it at most times. He had prattling on, mostly to himself, about where he might find a remedy to the Black Pearl’s current curse, only half aware that he was only talking to himself. Despite the Admiral’s renewed, youthful appearance, he seemed gaunt, haunted, and bitter. In the light of the damn window, it looked as if all the Fountain’s work had been undone.

“Hector,” Jack cut in then, gaining his attention for a brief moment. “I won’t do to dwell on it. He’s gone now, it’s all water under the bridge.”

Barbossa gave him a stern look of consternation in the lantern light. “He raped you. Press-ganged, raped, tortured and otherwise violated you. All under the guise of actually wanting your father. And that’s not to mention the bit about your mother, nor his other long list of atrocities. And you say to me... ‘it’s all water under the bridge’?”

Jack frowned deeply and looked to the floor. “You needn’t quote his crimes back to me, I know them well. I was victim in most of them.”

“But you weren’t the only one!” the other man snarled. “Death was too good for ‘im!”

“Dead is dead!” Sparrow broke in then, lifting himself from the chair. “You have the man’s bloody years, for Christ’s sakes! What more can ye take?”

Barbossa found himself leaping to his one remaining foot, grabbing the cabin wall for support as he thundered; “It’s not enough! It’ll never be enough!” He turned over a hefty cabinet filled with what was probably priceless porcelain and china and let the whole thing shatter upon the floor. Jack stood, watching the ruins of it settle into the cracks and crags of the warped wood as the older

pirate's face crumpled into a weeping frown and he did his best to cover it before allowing one raw, ragged sob escape his lips. He felt so cheated. All his life he had been cheated, of a family, of a proper upbringing, of equality, of position and standing, betrayed by the few men he offered his heart to. He had Jack, and for that he would trade nothing, but Groves...why did he have to trade one for the other, just like always? Was he really asking so much of the world that had always been cruel to him?

He slid down the floor and tried to find his restraint, but it wouldn't come. He heard the crunching of broken glass under boots as Jack made his way to his side and sat down beside him on the floor, pulling him against him. Hector went, giving no fight. "Disgrace I am..." he muttered, voice thick and a bit garbled by tears. "Allowing that man to die for me. Why did I leave him there, Jack? Why did I leave him alone in that place?"

"We were given no other choice," Sparrow consoled. "He would not have blamed you."

"But what if he was still alive?" he asked then, looking up at dark skinned man with blood shot eyes, "What if I trapped him there and left him to die?"

Jack had considered this possibility, but was wise enough not to voice it. He felt very unlikely that Groves could have survived such a mortal wound, and even if he had not breathed his last upon their parting, he was surely only moments from it. Chancing going back would have condemned them all to die there, and that would have been no victory at all. "You can't torture yourself with 'what if's', mate. All it will bring you is madness and remorse." He spoke from experience after all.

He kissed the top of Hector's red hair, smoothing down the unruly strands and waited for him to have it all out. Only once the man had gone quiet and limp did Jack make any attempt to move him, dragging him back up into the bed and spreading him across the covers. Once he had pulled off Hector's boot and made him comfortable, he undressed as well, setting the hat of the late Edward Teach upon the desk among it's lingering artifacts and spoils. For a moment, Jack thought he felt the rustle of a ghost within the room with him, almost felt as though he could feel Teach's tormented and restless spirit moving about. It would not have surprised him.

The hate had gone out of him, leaving him nothing but dully angry and numb about the whole thing, unsure whether or not any of it had been real. It had certainly been one of his more absurd adventures, discounting the Locker. At the end of it all, who was the real Edward Teach? Truly a soul born of Hell? Or a simple man, who had fallen farther than most could imagine? Jack had felt his loneliness in those brief and strange moments with the other captain. That sort of painful, unending longing. It was tragic, worthy of pity. But down the long years ahead, Edward Teach wouldn't be pitied. He would be feared, maybe even envied, for all that would remain of him in this world was the man that he had created; Blackbeard the pirate. Fearsome, merciless, and cruel.

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In the cave everything had grown still; the water had ceased to surg and drown, and all human voices had disappeared from the place, leaving only bodies and bones among the moss covered ruins. In this almost perfect silence, something began to shift and stir. A ripple appeared below the shallow pools leading to the crumbled remains of the Fountain itself, and in the dim light from beyond, a ripple of scales could be seen.

They emerged together upon the rocks, Philip gasping loudly as if he had been holding his breath for a long time. It was more out of reflex that actual necessity for air, for though he should have drowned long ago, he had found strangely that his submergence had no ill effect upon him. He stared at the woman beside him, who's face had once more resumed a more human appearance since she had emerged from the water. "Are you alright?"

"Yes...surprised, a little." He said, wiping his face and smiling nervously. He looked around at all the dead scattered around them upon the rocks, particularly at the gruesome skeletons that seemed littered strangely among them. Philip lifted himself out of the shallows of the pool, kneeling on the rocks. "My God...we've come too late."

He felt deep remorse for the fate of these men welling up inside him, almost over powered by it. He wondered if Syrena could feel his sadness as he looked upon their slack faces and empty eyes. But there were faces missing among these; and this brought him some hope. There was no sign of Captain Sparrow, nor Barbossa, nor Shandy or many of his other former shipmates. Somehow they must have escaped the massacre, and were perhaps still alive somewhere.

As he moved about, his lover watching him uneasily from her pool, he heard a quiet groan that almost went unheard. He paused and looked around hurriedly, finding the sprawled figure of a young sailor, a bullet wound in his gut, whimpering faintly.

Philip rushed to him, kneeling beside the man, amazed to find a survivor. But as he gripped the man's cold, bloody hand, he thought he had perhaps spoken too soon. "Can you hear me, sir? I will assist you, however I can. Can you tell me your name?" he pleaded gently.

The sailor below him did not open his eyes, but faintly his pale lips muttered something that sounded like "Grove" or "Groves" to Philip's straining ears. And he remembered him as the man who had stood beside Barbossa when he had stumbled upon them and helped him rescue his love among the Jungle Pools. Syrena came to join them there upon the rock, looking pitifully down upon the man beneath young Philip Swift. She touched his cheek with her delicate hand; "He is but an inch from death."

"Can you save him?" The missionary found himself blurting out then, looking in her wide dark eyes. "You have the power to heal, to revive those who are wounded. Can you do nothing for this poor soul?" He had no idea if he asking too much, or if this request would be an insult to her, for she was still a creature of mystery to him and he knew so little of her ways.

Syrena gazed upon the dying man's face, remembering his eyes as he had looked at her, staked and helpless and left to die. He had pitied her, and wondered at her, and there was no cruelty there in his heart. So she reached down and plucked one of her golden scales from her long luminous tail, positioning herself beside the two men upon the stone. "I will try."

***

Tortuga, three weeks later...

They had arrived just ahead of the coming storm, for Hurricane season was at her height, and the fact that they had sailed the Atlantic in such good time without meeting disaster along the way, was only testament to their favor in the eyes of the Sea herself.

The port reflecting the growing climate, groups of people shuffling along the damp cobblestones and muddy streets, coats and shawls dragged up over their heads to keep out the driving rain and the chill as they sought shelter in the nearest pub for a sit in front of a warm fire and a mug of hot ale or beer. Thoroughly drenched, Hector and Jack ducked inside an old familiar haunt of theirs, “The Crow’s Nest” and shook the water from their hats and collars. “Blimey, she’s in a mood!” Hector muttered, shaking out his soaked green head scarf, red braid at the back of his head whipping about as he tried to get the unpleasant feeling of water out from beneath it.

“June to November, she always is.” Jack nodded, also looking half drowned. He tipped the water from the brim of his tri-corner hat and left a sizable puddle upon the floor in front of him. Hector looked to him, steadying himself on his new crutch. “What makes you think he’ll be here?”

“Just a feeling.” Jack nodded, referring of course to his father, Captain Teague. It was always hard to say where the winds might blow the aging yet lively Keeper of the Code, but Jack knew that Teague was really a creature of comfort, and liked to stay closer to places he knew in his advancing age, then go gallivanting across the seas. And Tortuga was as much home as any port could be. “Keep a sharp eye.”

As they cast about for signs of familiar faces among the huddled crowd, whom seemed cheery if not a bit subdued do to the dampening weather, Hector stumbled upon one that almost made him jump out of his skin. He roughly grabbed Jack by the arm and dragged him close to him, gaping and pointing. “It can’t be!”

“Wot can’t?”

He followed Hector’s wide stare towards a pair of men seated about three tables in front of them,

and found himself gaping as well. The pair moved forward in tandem, and realized that no, it in fact could not be.

The man who's face that had so startled them, was that of the Malaysian born former Lord of the South China Sea, the late Sao Jing. Glancing only at the man's face in the firelight, Hector had seen the bright shadow of the man's nephew, Sao Feng, there, for the family resemblance was somewhat strong within the clan. But with just a blink, the truth was discovered. This man was easily in his sixties, and his once ink black mane of hair was now the color of the stormy sea outside, grey and glistening. His almond eyes, wider than his brother and nephews, giving him a more gentle look, had wrinkles at the edges, and his beard was cut short, rather than long and flowing as was typical of his culture in aging men.

He was sitting rather close to, in fact, fawning over, the man next to him, who was also white haired, but much stronger looking, tan and covered in tattoos, his bare arms hard knots of lean muscle with slightly aging skin that in maybe ten years or more would look leathery.

"Lord Sao Jing?"

"Old Tobes?"

Both men turned in surprise at being summoned, much less by those names, and blinked in surprise at their gawking company. "Slap me twice and hand me to me mother! Jack Sparrow!" The tan skinned man known as Tobes lifted himself from his chair, revealing his towering height and engulfed Jack in a bear hug that lifted him from the floor. Sparrow wheezed and grimaced awkwardly in the rib-crushing grip. "Good to see you too!" he managed.

The smaller man stood, his robes shifting around him as he moved to greet the gawking red-haired man, peering into his face with a look of pleasant curiosity. "By Calypso herself...Hector Barbossa, can it really be you?"

Hector bowed awkwardly. "My Lord...I thought you were–?"

"Dead? I am. Or at least, for all intents and purposes of any consequence." He ushered the man to stand straight again, putting his hands upon his shoulders and smiling up at him. "Time has been good to you. You hardly look more than the boy who once so brazenly traversed the streets of Singapore with my nephew." His face fell a little. "Were you ever able to make amends with him, before his death?"

"No." Hector said, with genuine remorse.

Sao Jing nodded sadly. "A great pity." He hugged the man fondly, which caused Hector to feel even more awkward and confused. "I always felt you were very good for him."

"Oy! Enough already, Tobes!" Jack had finally managed to wrench himself free of the freakishly strong sailor's grip, mussed and winded for the trouble. "It's good to see you Jackie! Where have you been lurking?" He looked from Jing to Barbossa, "And who is this?"

"Don't recognize me?" Hector smirked to the tattooed pirate, "We once served the same captain." The man in front of him balked, the familiar accent catching in his memory. "Hector?" He had met Barbossa as a young man, when Teague had first brought him aboard the Misty Lady. But his meetings with the man had been few and far between, as shortly after Tobes was sailing his own ship under Teague's flag, and spending most of his time in the South China Seas. "Jing wasn't

joking! You're a sight to behold," He looked again at Jack, squinting. "Both of you in fact..." he added, his tone becoming quiet and curious. "What have you two blokes been up to?"

Jack removed the black tri-corner hat from his belt and held it up for Tobes to see. "Look familiar at all?"

He didn't expect it to, for without it's owner it seemed like just an ordinary hat. But Tobes stared at it, and his eyes darkened. "Where did you get this?"

Jack answered his question with another. "Where is he?"

Tobes thumbed towards a darkened corner of the pub by the fireplace, where Teague was sitting with his back to them, lazily strumming his guitar. Jack started off after him, and Hector made to follow, but Tobes held out a hand and barred his path. "I've a feeling this is family business."

Hector started to argue and then thought better of it.

Jack stepped deliberately in front of the table where his father sat, and the leathery skinned pirate did not so much as miss a note, nor look up at him before he spoke; "Well? Was I right, Jackie?"

The man before him flung the hat to the table in front of the aging pirate without a word. Teague sleepily glanced down at it, his expression remaining somewhat sedated and impassive. "'S'very nice hat, but I like mine better."

"That is the hat of the man that murdered your wife."

A sour note twanged upon Teague's strings seeming to flitter through the room, making several patrons look up at them in curiosity and annoyance before returning to their drinks and conversations. Slowly Teague turned his eyes upon his son, reaching for the hat upon the table. "What did you say?"

"That is the hat of the late Captain Blackbeard."

"Late? Blackbeard?" Teague repeated the words as if in a fog, unable to comprehend the meaning of them. Jack continued to stare down at him; "Better known to you as Edward Teach."

Now it was Teague's turn to fall silent. He stared at the hat awhile, the rusty gears of his memory turning over one another as he tried to recall it, and the name of it's former owner. Watching his father, Jack sat himself across from him, watching his face intently. He didn't know what he expected to see. Relief? Anger? Regret?

After another few moments the old pirate looked up at him with his hooded eyes. "Explain yourself, boy."

"I think that explanation begins with you," the younger captain replied, almost tartly. "You know, you've been a great many things through out my life; a drunk, a blighter, a bit of a brute and a bastard when you well wanted to be. The one thing I never thought you were was a liar."

“Call me that again!” Teague snarled at the insult, waving his pistol at the boy, but Jack was unmoved. “You told me you never knew her killer, but you did. It was the man you stupidly slept with and lead on! It was Teach!”

“I never–!” But he had. And he remembered now, as it clicked into place. Yes, Edward Teach. It had been before his marriage, in that brief and lonely time that he awaited his wife’s arrival from Haiti. He had buried it, and all thoughts of it since. Teach had faded from the light, and Blackbeard had arisen without Teague ever realizing that they were one in the same.

He looked at his son with questioning eyes. “How?” was all he managed out of the torrid of questions that were swarming around his mind.

Jack began slowly, and Teague listened without speaking for a time. When Sparrow had finally finished in detail the manner in which he had run Teach through in a final act of vengeance as the Fountain claimed him as a sacrifice, they sat in silence with the heavy weight of his words muffling the air around them. Jack took the shrunken head from his belt then and placed it in his father’s palm. “She can rest now. You both can.”

Teague stared at the shrunken skull lovingly, his eyes misty, and kissed it before putting her away gently inside his coat and leaning back in his chair once more, scratching the lonely spot above his dog’s ear as it laid it’s mangy head in his lap below the table. “Well?” Jack asked then. “Haven’t you got anything to say?”

At first no answer came, and Jack, growing frustrated with his father’s ever increasing aloofness and mysterious behavior, stood and made to walk away. Teague reached and grabbed his wrist then, stopping and turning him around. Before Jack could mutter so much as insult, the man had his arms around him, hugging him tightly to him as he had so few times in his life. Sparrow was stunned into motionlessness, even when he came to realize the old pirate was weeping as he held him. “She did love you. And so do I. More than you know.” He kissed his son’s cheek and clapped him hard on the back before stepping back and giving him a grateful yet tearful smile. “You’re a fine pirate, Captain Sparrow.”

Jack fumbled with this emotional display, smiling himself. “Fruit didn’t fall far from the tree, I guess...”

Teague smiled again and let his eyes drift towards the nearby table, where they were being spied upon by three familiar sets of eyes. His fell upon the tall red head he realized must be Hector Barbossa. “Keep the ones that hold your heart close, Jackie. You never know what tide and fortune might come to sweep them away.”

It was a lesson Teague needn’t have imparted, for Jack already knew it well. His father started off towards the table ahead of him, bent and said something to Tobes who gave him a worried glance, clutched his hand, and then moved off towards the upper level, where he undoubtedly had a room waiting, the old dog following at his heels.

The Captain of the Black Pearl stood motionless for a long moment, staring after him, until a familiar arm encircled him, leading him along. Hector looked at him fondly; “Come on. There’s one more face ye need to see.”

“Who?”

Leaving the older clan of pirates to their own devices, Jack found himself lead through the crowded bar towards a closed off back room, reserved for some of the most important, and often secretive guests. They were greeted at the door by two rather large, hulking looking brutes, each at least two hundred pounds and wearing the sign of the dragon, indicating their loyalty to Singapore. “We wish to see the king.” Hector stated bluntly, looking at the two of them.

The guards looked from each other to the smaller man before them. “Who wants to see the King?”

Hector took off his hat and smacked them both with it, showing his face. “It’s me, ye gits!”

Without the shade of his hat, the two brutes could see the tear shaped scar upon the man’s cheek and gave a startled look of surprise, both quickly dropping the tough act; “So sorry, Lord Barbossa. Please, enter.”

“That’s more like it.”

“Again, I shall never understand you.” Jack replied as they were ushered inside. They stepped into the candle lit room to find a woman, dressed in a man’s shirt and vest with a long flowing skirt, golden hair done back in a long braid, holding a tiny bundle as she poured over maps and charts and bits of parchment. Elizabeth Turner looked up at both of them in surprise, then smiled. “Hector! Jack!”

Before Jack could really register what he was seeing, Hector had crossed the distance between them and engulfed the young woman in a fierce embrace. “Ye’ve never looked better, m’dear.” The red-haired pirate grinned, looking at her proudly. She stared back at him, smiling but seeming a bit startled. “I must admit that I’m surprised...to see you. Both of you. You look...”

She touched Barbossa’s cheek, startled by the smoothness of it, and he smirked and looked to his partner. “It be a long tale, Elizabeth. I’m sure you understand.”

Jack started forward, glad to see her as well, but kept an awkward bit of distance between himself and the woman who had once murdered him. “Getting along alright then, are you, your majesty? One year down, nine to go, eh?”

“Not quite a year,” Elizabeth nodded, and Jack for the first time noticed the tiny bundle she had been cradling so carefully. Inside was a tiny, sleeping baby boy with a head of curly brown hair. “More like eleven months, I’d wager.” Hector nodded. “May I?”

Ever more stunned and impressed by the strange, soft under belly of Babossa’s brash personality, Elizabeth gently handed him her son and stood with Jack as they watched the other man fawn all over the child. The new Pirate Lord of Singapore, and King of the Brethern Court, turned to the man next to her. “It’s good to see you, Jack.”

“You too, Elizabeth.” he nodded. “And what be the babe’s name?”

“William. Like his father.”

“And his father before that.” He put a hand upon her arm. “It’s a fine name.”

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They waited out the storm for three days, and on the forth, though the sky was overcast and the sea still churned with a sickly slate, green water, Jack turned towards the docks with his few possessions, most notably the bottle containing the cursed Black Pearl, and his faithful First Mate Joshamee Gibbs. Behind them followed Hector, who looked as melancholy as the weather.

“Are ye sure this be the proper course?” he asked the dark haired man as Gibbs was busy bartering passage for the two of them on a trading ship bound for Haiti. “Would ye not prefer to stay in my company?”

Jack turned sadly to his lover and kissed him fondly, not caring who saw. “It’s what I want most, to be certain. But there are things a man must do on his own, and the jungles of Haiti are no place for you. You need to sail to fairer waters and keep well out of the way of the King’s navy, m’love. When I have the Pearl again, I shall find you.”

“Then that is a day worth waiting for.”

They held each other for a time, reluctant to let go. “After all this time,” Hector mumbled, not wanting to admit the heartbreak and disappoint he felt in Jack’s descision to leave once more; “And I still can not keep you.”

The dark skinned pirate shook his head, smiling; “You hold me here.” He put his hand over Hector’s heart. “That’s the only place that really matters.”

Gibbs did his best not to stare, and while he couldn’t say he wasn’t glad to be parting ways with Barbossa, he knew that it was difficult for Sparrow and respected his feelings toward the man, however loathe he was to understand them.

“And where will you go, Hector?”

“I shall stay with the lass a time, I think.” he answered thoughtfully, speaking of Elizabeth. “There is business in Singapore long left unfinished. Perhaps the Caspian and South China Seas will be better for this new alliance. I find Elizabeth far more agreeable to negotiate with than Sao ever was.” He tried to smile, but it just wasn’t in him then. Jack kissed him again, “I love you Hector.”

“And I you.”

Sparrow turned and made for the gang plank at Gibb’s call, then paused and tapped the compass, “I’ll know where to find you then. In a month’s time, yes?”

“Aye, ye can be sure of it!”

“Oh, and Jack?”

“Yes?”

He held out his hand expectantly, and Sparrow blinked for a moment, then sighed, tossing from his affects a stolen sack of Hector's money and various trinkets, including one of his rings. "Ye thieving little blighter."

"They were keep sakes!" Jack reasoned. "I'm keeping the rum!" And he darted up the plank before Hector could say another word.

He watched Jack until he became a blot upon the horizon, and by then he felt that someone new had come to his side. He turned with damp eyes to see Sao Jing, his robes rustling around him in the wind. "Singapore eagerly awaits your return, Barbossa. We have much to discuss."

"Aye, Jing we do." He scratched his beard thoughtfully. "What say you to a little venture, say to the Americas?"

"That is a great distance across hostile waters. What for?"

"Something I lost, and am keen to find again."

End

Chapter End Notes

* Sao Jing and Old Tobes are OCs that belong to myself and hellsingfanchick
*thanks to everyone who stuck in there till the end!! :D

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